

ABE LINCOLN

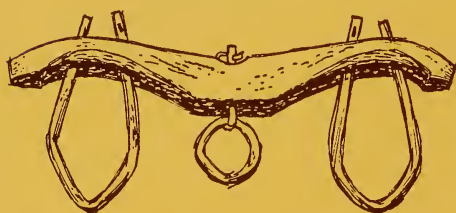
At Loafer Station

ANET GARRISON



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ABE LINCOLN
at LOAFER STATION

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A Novel Based on Hoosier Legends

by ANET GARRISON



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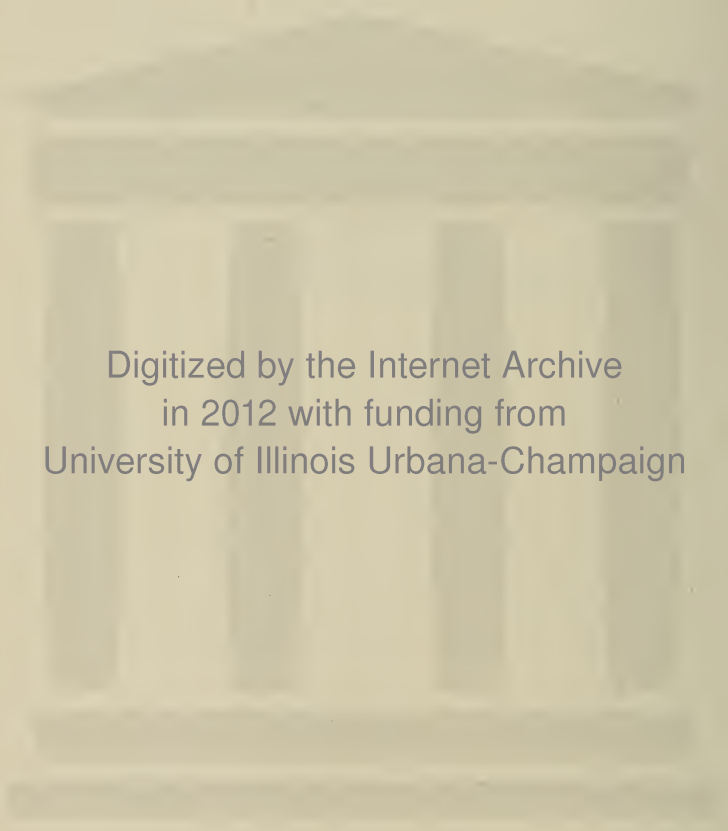
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To my mother

MARY JANE BLACK GARRISON

and my aunt

DOVIE GARRISON KITCHEN



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ABE LINCOLN
at LOAFER STATION

THE STRANGER PULLED UP

his horse at the crossroads and looked the settlement over, noting the blacksmith shop, the general store, the saloon, the schoolhouse and the church.

"Looks purty good," he reflected, "even iffen they do call hit Loafer Station, of all things."

With a thoughtful air he dismounted and tied his horse to a tree. He spat out his cud of tobacco and, as was his habit, pulled at the brim of his hat, pinching it into a point in front, before he entered the store.

Inside, half a dozen men were sitting around talking, punctuating their conversation by spitting into the ash box by the stove.

An old fellow behind the counter craned his neck and peered over the top of his glasses. "Howdy."

"Howdy, all." The stranger settled himself on a bench and took a twist of tobacco from his pocket. He sized it up, making his decision on which end to bite, then gnawed off a good-sized hunk.

"New in this neck of the woods, hain't you?" the storekeeper inquired.

"Yep. Name's Isaac Garrison. Got a place fifteen-twenty mile from here, in the bottoms over by the Ohio."

"Over near Rockport, maybe?"

"That's right. Me and my wife hail from Ohio. Warn't so long ago we come out here to Indiana, but now the furniture's actin restless, like hit's time to move on again. We got another young 'un comin along, an iffen we don't hurry and git moved, we'll have two children that was borned in the same house."

Garrison's humor was well appreciated by his company of settlers in the wilderness. But when the general laughter died out, he turned serious.

"Hain't had no luck a-tall where we air at," he explained in answer to questions. "First, the grasshopper plague. Then wheat rust. Then them everlastin army worms, an after that, the dang caterpillars." Then men all shook their heads and grunted in sympathetic understanding. "Worst thing is, though," Garrison went on, "in them swampy river bottoms, my young'uns air allus a-comin down with chills and fever. Both my gals air puny, an my boy Tom, now—I need him to help me with the plowin an lookin after the stock, but he's been ailin ever since we come out here. Melinda—that's my wife—she says she don't aim to bring another young'un into the world just to be filled up with sickness right from the start."

Again everyone expressed sympathy. "You need to move to high ground, that's dry," one man said.

Garrison nodded. "That's what I'm a-lookin for. I figger to take up gover'ment land."

The storekeeper leaned across the counter eagerly. "You couldn't find no better land than right around here. We got a fine, friendly community, all upright men with decent

families. Now, I allus say you kin tell a honest man by peerin in his face, an I knowed when you come in, you was just the kinda feller we need around here."

"Bill Brown here is figgerin you'd be another customer for him," one of the fellows said, grinning.

A long-legged man looked up from his whittling to say, "He's right about the land, though. They's a spot just west of here as good as you could hope to find. Mostly woods, though. You'd hafta do a lotta clearin."

"Well, that gives you plenty of logs handy for yore cabin," said Old Man Brown. "An jest to show you the kinda folks we have here, I'll guarantee that ever tarnation one of these fellers'll help you cut yore trees an roll yore logs."

The group around the stove nodded vigorously in agreement. "Shore." "Glad to, any day."

"Begins to look like Mr. Brown will git me for a customer. I see he handles jest about ever'thing."

"Anything a feller has money to pay for," the storekeeper stated proudly.

"You say they's good gover'ment land real near? My wife would be right pleased to live close to a town with a school an a house of God. She says our young'uns air bein raised like heathens."

"We got a grist mill here, too," the storekeeper pointed out, "an a doctor in town."

The tall fellow stood up. "You come home with me an put up for the night," he told the newcomer, "an in the mornin I'll show you the place I was talkin' about."

"I'll shore be obliged to you." Garrison shook hands all around and left with his host.

The two men rode for a distance of "two hoots and a holler" to the east of town. When they turned into a barn lot, a lanky youngster with unruly hair came running to meet them and take care of their horses.

"My boy Abe," the tall man said.

"By thunder," said Garrison, "I plumb forgot to ast yore name."

"Lincoln. Tom Lincoln."

In the house, the guest was introduced to Tom's wife, Nancy, and to a young girl named Sarah.

"Mighty fine fam'ly you have here, Tom," Garrison said at supper.

"Think so myself, Isaac. None better. I useta git after Abe for spendin so much time a-readin an a-figgerin, but his ma said to leave him alone. The boy's a fool for readin and writin; seems hit's jest in him to do hit."

"You'd be better off, Tom, iffen you'd been more like him when you was his age," Nancy Lincoln said.

"I'd be right proud iffen ary of my young'uns took a interest in somethin like that," said Isaac. "Seems all they ever think about is tomfoolery."

"How many childern you got, Mr. Garrison?" Sarah asked.

"Five boys and two dishwashers. They's Joe; he's the onliest one that's able yet to help me much with the work. Tom, that's jest a little younger'n Abe here, he'll be the smartest, I reckon. There's Jack, an the twins. That's the five boys. The gals air Eunice—we call her Eunie—an little Betsy. Then there's another one a-comin that we hope will be a gal, too, so she kin grow up to help her ma."

"Hit must be nice to have a big fam'ly like that," said Mrs. Lincoln. "We'd shore like to have you'uns for neighbors."

Early the next morning Tom took Isaac to look over the country just beyond Loafer Station.

"Hit's purty," Isaac said.

"You won't find no better land nowheres."

"This'll be a good place to raise childern. I kin see the happy look in Melinda's eyes when I tell her. I'm goin home

and sell out right away, an you kin look for us to be a-comin up the road real soon."

Tommy Garrison was dog-tired. All day, with Pa and Joe he had trudged along, driving the stock—cows, hogs, sheep, and a few goats. Up ahead, the ramshackle old covered wagon that had brought the family's belongings from Ohio rattled along. Ma was driving the oxen, calling "gee" for right and "haw" for left.

Keeping the stock from straying was hard work, and because he was tired, Tommy was in the mood to get mad. It seemed to him that everybody else was having it easier than he was. Betsy sat beside Ma, and Eunie, who was having a chill, was lying down inside the wagon. The twins rode at the tail end of the wagon, with their feet hanging down, while Jack rode the one horse. The sight of Jack and the twins made Tommy feel sorry for himself. Then a stubborn old cow turned out of the road for the hundredth time, and Pa sent Tommy chasing after her, not Joe.

"Joe's Pa's pet and hog-lazy, an so all the hard work gits put on me," Tommy thought. "By God," he burst out, "I hain't a-gonna drive these dang brutes one more step!"

Now Isaac Garrison cussed whenever he felt like it, but he didn't allow his boys to do the same. Tommy had hardly opened his mouth when he felt the sting of a hickory switch across his back. With tears in his eyes he turned and ran into the woods. Pa called after him, but Tommy kept on running till he was out of earshot.

Now he could cuss all he pleased. "God damn you, you old numbskull!" Pretending he was talking right to Pa's face, he really let her rip. "You old devil, you snake-in-the-grass! I hate you an all yore relations, you—you son-of-a-bitch!"

The awful words made him ashamed of himself, but he was too mad to care. In his imagination he had a real fight with Pa and bit Pa on the leg.

"I'll run away, that's what I'll do," he said. "Pa and Ma don't keer nothin for me; they just got me for a slave."

Walking on, he wondered what it would be like to make a slave to do all your work for you. He decided to get a job and save his money, and then go south and buy him one. Then all he'd have to do would be to tell his slave, "Do this, do that, an don't take all day about it, damn you."

Now the sun was getting low. Piled-up clouds in the west turned gold, then flamed scarlet. Sitting on a log, Tommy watched the scarlet fade to rose. As the color drained out of the sky and gray twilight began to creep over the land, he realized that he was not only tired, but also hungry. Maybe he'd better put off running away.

"Pa'll whale me agin iffen I go back," he thought. But the gnawing in his stomach decided him. He started back toward the road.

The darkening woods were full of small noises. "I hain't afeard, not me," he said out loud. Then, "Wished I had Pa's gun. Iffen I could take back a turkey or a deer, maybe that'd take Pa's mind offen the hickory switch."

As darkness thickened, the noises in the woods seemed to come closer. Tommy quickened his pace. By the time he reached the road, he was running. Scared stiff, he ran all the rest of the way to Loafer Station.

There was no sign of the covered wagon, and so, after some hesitation, Tommy went into Brown's store.

"What you want, son?" Old Man Brown peered over his glasses. "Oh. Reckon you air Isaac Garrison's boy."

Tommy nodded. "You know where my folks air at, mister?"

"Over to Tom Lincoln's. They figgered you'd be along soon. You stay here tonight, an yore pa'll come fetch you in the mornin'."

"Dog take hit!" Tommy muttered.

He felt better, though, when Martha Brown, a kindly

woman, led him to her kitchen and set out head cheese and fried pumpkin. He wolfed the food and gulped down quantities of milk. If he lived a hundred years, nothing else would ever taste so good as Mrs. Brown's fried dried-apple pie.

"You shore air a good cook, ma'am."

"I like to see folks eat when they set down to my table."

Soon Tommy's stomach was tight. "Reckon I'll set out on the porch awhile."

"Not too long. Hit's gittin close to bedtime."

He sat awhile in the dark, feeling lonesome because his folks had gone off and left him. By and by he strolled down the road to the saloon and peeped in.

"Purty soon I'll be a man," Tommy thought, "and then, by God, I'll git drunk an jest shoot up this here town. I'll ride up and down the road, an ary person shows their head, I'll shoot 'em."

Something moved in the road near his feet. When he saw what it was, Tommy forgot his quarrel with the world. A squirrel with a hurt leg—probably run over by a wagon wheel.

"Pore little mite." Gently he picked it up and slipped it under his shirt.

Old Mrs. Brown had made a bed for him, and Tommy crawled into it with the squirrel still hid inside his shirt. Sinking into the warmth of the featherbed, he whispered to his new pet.

"I'll call you Hickory, 'cause of what happened today. But I'll never whop you, Hickory. You air my onliest friend, I reckon. Iffen Pa whales me tomorrer, what say you an me go off an live wild in the woods together?"

Tommy dreamed that night of dark woods full of snakes and bears. In the morning he opened his eyes to find Pa leaning over him. For a wonder, Pa wasn't mad.

"Rise an shine, son. Here's a new friend for you. Abe, this is my Tommy. Tommy, this here is Abe Lincoln."

ABE AND TOMMY TOOK A liking to each other right away. When his pa went to talk with Old Man Brown, Tommy held up the covers and showed Abe the squirrel.

"Hit shore is purty," said Abe. "I like wild things."

"Here, hold him for me while I git my britches on."

"I don't like to see wild things kept in. People an wild things oughta be free to do an go when they've a mind to. Iffen this was my squir'l, I'd turn him loose."

"Aw, shucks, Abe. Gimme back Hickory. Pa's a-hollerin for us."

The boys found both their pas in the store.

"This bein Sat'day," Tom Lincoln was saying, "hit's the best day to drum up men for the logrollin. Ever'body for miles around comes to town to do their tradin. Whoever you won't find here in the store will be over at the saloon, a-swappin yarns an gittin soaked." He introduced Isaac to everyone present, saying, "Isaac here is a purty fine feller an a friend of mine. He's jest took up new land over west a

little ways from here. What say we go over Monday mornin, bright an early, an help him git started?"

Half a dozen men promised to come, and one old fellow named Josh Hart told Isaac, "Reckon I'm too old to do much work, but I'll come over an boss the job. You know if you ain't got a boss, these fellers'll loaf. But by jiggers, I'll keep 'em busy."

Old Man Brown offered to ask everyone else who came into the store that day, and so after a while Tom and Isaac and the two boys went on down the road to the blacksmith shop. There, after swapping jokes awhile, Tom recruited three or four more helpers. Then he led the way to the saloon.

"You young'uns git on back to the store," Isaac told the boys. "We'll come fetch you when we're ready to leave town."

Both boys were disappointed; they had figured on hanging around the saloon and listening to the talk. With their fathers' eyes on them, though, there was nothing they could do but walk back to Brown's. They settled themselves on the steps of the porch to listen to the talk there.

"Here comes Old Wiley Willis," said Abe.

"He don't look so old to me," said Tommy.

"Ever'body calls him Old Wiley 'cause he wears that long beard. He's allus in a bad way, like now."

Old Wiley swayed up the steps. "Lord A'mighty, boys, you got no call to look at me thataway. I hain't drunk. I'm a man allus knows when to stop." Then, to the men on the porch, "Howdy, all. I'm tol'able, myself. Truth is, I oughta be dead this minute an gone to glory, but I keep puttin off goin; I'm better acquainted here."

He zigzagged toward the door and went inside. In a minute he came out again, munching on a nickel's worth of cheese and crackers, and sat down near the boys.

"By jacks," he announced, "I'm gonna learn some kinda trade. I'm tarred of kissin people's tails to git a odd job here an a odd job there."

Old Josh Hart spat over the porch rail expressively, "You wouldn't never work steady at no trade, Wiley—jest long enough to git the money for more whiskey. Then you'd go lay drunk somewheres."

Old Wiley put on a look of injured dignity. "That dogged old idiot kin lie faster'n a turkey kin gobble grasshoppers." When he had finished the last of his cheese and crackers, he become melancholy, and speaking more to himself than to anyone else, began to talk about the old settlers. Most of his talk was just rambling, but for a minute he sounded as if he were preaching a sermon or reciting poetry. "They come along afore us an went on, scatterin an rejoinin an separatin again, goin outa mem'ry like the rushin waters of a river."

Now he began to talk about his mother, who was "gone to glory," and tears flowed from his eyes. "Iffen she was alive, I wouldn't git drunk like this. That old battle-ax of a stepma that Pap brung home—I hadda leave home account of her. Hadda leave to keep from killin her."

At about this time Tom Lincoln and Isaac rode up. Each boy mounted behind his pa.

"Isaac, you'uns will stay with us till yore house is ready," Tom said.

"I'm mighty obliged, Tom, but I don't aim to ride a free horse to death. Tomorrow we'll move on over to our own place. Lindy an the gals kin sleep in the wagon, an me an the boys kin sleep out for a spell."

Tom wasn't going to hear of such a thing, but Isaac told him, "I know Lindy, an she'll like hit better thataway. Bein in the fam'ly way, she'd ruther be where nobody but her own folks kin see her."

At the Lincoln place, Nancy and Melinda came out to

meet their menfolks in the dooryard. Abe had been silent and thoughtful all the way home, and now, while his pa's horse was still moving, he slid off over the horse's rump and ran over to his ma. He hugged her tight and kissed her.

"I'm goin over the hill right away, Ma, to git you some game. Maybe a wild turkey." He hugged her again.

"Land's sake, Abe," said Nancy, "what's come over you that all of a sudden you're so fond of me?"

"I seen Old Wiley Willis a-cryin over his dead ma," Abe told her, "an I got homesick for you an yore good cookin. Old Wiley ran away from home when his pa brung home a stepma. I'd do the same, Ma, if Pa brung some other woman here to take yore place."

Nancy laughed. "Well, don't fret. I hain't a-fixin to die an give him the chanst."

"You better not," Abe told her seriously, "cause if you died, I'd go git drunk jest like Old Wiley."

"Then I hope yore pa'd whop the daylight's outen you." Nancy turned to Melinda. "For all his foolishness, my Abe is a real good boy. See my bran' new ash hopper, right over yander? Abe built hit for me, with his pa's help. He was after me to make some hom'ny, an I told him, 'To make hom'ny, I got to have lye, an to make lye, I got to have ashes.' Our old ash hopper had plumb rotted to pieces. Well, Abe got after his pa, an they set to work an made that new one. Then he said, 'Now make the hom'ny, Ma. Betcha I kin eat the whole batch at one settin.' He purty near did, too."

"Fine job," said Isaac. "Bet Lindy would admire to have a ash hopper like that there."

"I shore would."

"I'll come over to yore place, Miz Garrison," Abe told her, "an teach Tommy an yore husbin how to make one." The grownups smiled.

Next day, when Isaac yoked up the oxen, Abe begged to be allowed to go along with the Garrisons to their new place. They were glad to have him, and his ma and pa consented. Tommy especially was happy to have Abe along, not only for his company, but also for his help with the stock. As a matter of fact, Tommy took advantage of Abe. That same old cow that had a mind of her own kept straying off into the fields and woods, and of course all the other animals wanted to follow her. Time and time again Abe chased that cow. Tommy had pointed out that he was younger and got tired easily. But at last the time came when good-natured Abe decided he had had enough.

"Tommy, don't that cow belong to you'uns? She shore hain't my pa's or mine. Iffen you don't want the wagon to go off an leave her, go git her yore own self. I'm tarred."

Tommy sulked. "Abe Lincoln, I plumb despise you," he complained. But Abe was unmoved, and from then on Tommy had to do his share.

"Look, Lindy," said Isaac, pointing, "I figger to put the cabin yander on that little rise. Iffen I cut down a few trees, we'll have a real purty view."

Melinda's eyes were glowing. "Don't cut down too many, Pa. I love trees."

"We kin plant that clear stretch in taters right away."

"My pa says you done right to take up this here land," Abe told them. "He says hit'll be worth somethin one of these days."

Tommy, still in a sullen mood, made a face at Abe. Abe chuckled.

"Now, that's a baby trick for shore."

"Don't you dast call me no baby! I'm near as old as you, and I got more sense than you got, you old mossback!"

Abe burst out laughing. That made Tommy so mad that for a minute he was hopping up and down, but then Melinda

began to pass out slabs of salt pork and cornbread. As soon as he had had something to eat, Tommy felt better, and in no time he and Abe were good friends again, both laughing and cutting up.

Even though this was the Lord's day, there was plenty of work that wouldn't wait. Isaac quickly knocked together a plank table beside the wagon, under the trees. Tommy and Abe carried water from the spring, and then gathered rocks and built an outdoor oven.

Before dawn next day, Isaac roused them out of their blankets to help tend the stock. Then everyone gathered around the new table. Breakfast was hardly over when people began arriving for the logrolling.

"Lawdy me, all them men," Melinda cried. "Maybe iffen I put on my old blue dress, they won't notice so plain." She scurried inside the wagon.

Tom Lincoln soon arrived, with Nancy riding behind him.

"Howdy, folks. By gum, looks like the whole country has turned out."

All day the woods were full of the noises of axes and saws. By nightfall the logs were all rolled in, ready for the building to begin. Next day Tom Lincoln and one or two others returned to help with the house-raising. Tom, who was especially good at carpentering—in fact, he made a business of it—was generous with his time. By the end of the week, the cabin was ready for the family to move in; the roof was on and the floor in. It was a neat cabin, with a big fireplace which would keep the Garrison boys busy fetching wood.

Abe got permission to stay on with the Garrisons to help with the job of chinking the cracks between the logs. With the wagon and oxen, Isaac brought a load of good clay from some distance away. Abe and Tom carried water and helped

mix the mud in a trough; then they worked hard at the chinking so that when the winter winds came, the cabin would be snug.

All this time, Hickory's leg had been healing. At night he had shared Tommy's blankets, and during the day, if Tommy had been working and hadn't been able to carry the squirrel around with him, Hickory had pretty much stayed put wherever Tommy had set him down. But one day at dinnertime, Hickory was not to be found.

"Hickory! Hey, Hickory!" Tommy called. "Abe, Hickory's done clumb a tree, an I can't find him nowheres. Come help me look." For hours Tommy ran around, calling, peering up every tree. He was broken-hearted.

Abe obligingly took part in the search, but he told his friend, "Betcha Hickory's gone home to his ma. A squir'l is better off livin wild, Tommy. You oughtn't to want him back."

"I reckon I'll jest hafta ketch me another squir'l," Tommy mourned. "You got queer notions, Abe."

ONE DAY IN EARLY OCTOBER

Tommy came home with a piece of sad news.

"Old Abe was down in the mouth today cause his ma's away from home. Old Man Sparrows an his wife was both took sick, an Miz Lincoln is over at their place takin keer of 'em."

"Shore she is," said Melinda. "Tom and Betsy Sparrows air the same as her ma an pa to Nancy. Both took down at onst, you say?"

"Wonder what ails 'em," said Isaac. "They's been a lotta talk at the store about how many people air a-comin down with the milk fever."

"You mean humans kin git it, besides cows?" Tommy asked.

"Yep. Hit's a terrible thing."

"Looks like the good Lord is a-sendin new sicknesses upon us in this sinful age," said Melinda. "We better all pray harder than we been doin."

A few days later Abe rode over to say that the old couple

had passed away, and that Tom Lincoln would appreciate Isaac's help in making the coffins. Other neighbors would dig the graves while the womenfolk were helping Nancy to wash the bodies and lay them out.

While they were working on the coffins, Tom confided his worries to Isaac. "Hit hain't been a good thing for Nancy to be here so long."

Tom bit off a chew of tobacco, and for a moment looked off into the distance without speaking, then went on. "At first we didn't know for shore what ailed the old folks. They kep a-gittin worse, spite of all Doc Kitchen could do. I took notice he tried ever'thing he had in his saddlebags. But hit seemed like nothin wouldn't help. Then I up an ast him, 'Doc, what kinda sickness is this?' Doc hemmed an hawed, didn't wanta say, but I made him spit it out. He says, 'Tom, I'll tell you what I think: I think hit's the milk sickness. They jest hain't nothin been found yet to cure hit. I've done ever'thing I knowed to do, but I'm afeard Tom an Betsy hain't got long to live.'"

"The milk sickness!" Isaac exclaimed in dismay. "That's catchin, hain't hit?"

"That's jest what I ast the doc. I says, 'Now look here, Doc, tell me the truth. Hain't hit catchin?' He says yes, an he was afeard for Nancy."

Tom spit, and again was silent for a minute. Then he said, "Warn't nothin I could say to Nancy. The Sparrowses never had no childern of their own, an when Nancy was a baby, they took her to raise, an loved her like their own. They was the only ma an pa she ever knowed. She stayed right at the bedside an nursed 'em to the end. Doc Kitchen says to make her take a good purge and some bitterroot tea when she gits home."

"Maybe that'll ward the sickness off," Isaac said hopefully.

Hauling the coffins up through the woods on a sled, the neighbors buried Tom and Betsy Sparrows on the crest of the hill.

Isaac had told Melinda what Tom had told him, and at the burying Melinda noticed that Nancy didn't look too well.

"I'm jest tarred," Nancy insisted. "I'll be all right soon as I git some rest."

Isaac and Tom talked about swapping some hogs, and the Lincolns promised to visit the Garrisons.

"We'll come real soon," said Nancy, "maybe Sat'day."

They didn't come Saturday, though, and another week went by with no sign of them. Tom Lincoln hadn't come over to talk about the deal with the hogs, and Tommy hadn't run across Abe anywhere.

"Lindy," said Isaac, "we hain't seen hide nor hair of the Lincolns for quite a spell. We better go over to their place. Might be sickness there." On second thought, though, he changed his mind. "Iffen hit's the milk sickness, you oughta be keerful. You hain't got long to go with that young'un."

"I hain't, for a fack," she agreed. "I kin feel hit a-kickin like a mule. I shore don't wanta come down sick an have a cryin baby on my hands to boot." She began to pray, raising her arms heavenward. "O Lord, help us poor mortals here below. Send us a cure for the new sickness that's takin so many of our people. An please, God, spare this here fam'ly from this terrible curse."

That night the Garrisons made a prayer circle and begged God to have mercy on Nancy Lincoln. "Lord, spare her for her little fam'ly," Isaac prayed. "She's a young woman yet, an her children need her. Lord, help us all in these dark days of trouble, an we'll praise Yore name."

Next morning Melinda said, "Isaac, we jest gotta go over there. Iffen Nancy's took down, the neighbors'll all be skeered to go in the house, an somebody hasta help."

"You air right, Lindy. I'll yoke up the oxens right now."

"No, wait a spell. I wanta churn 'fore we go. The milk's soured jest right, an I could take Nancy some good sweet butter."

"Well, hurry. We don't wanta git there jest at mealtime."

Tommy went out promptly to feed his pet coon that he and Joe had caught a few days before. A little later he came tearing back to the house, all out of breath.

"Pa, that critter is actin funny."

"Shucks, son, hit's jest tarred of bein cooped up."

"Well, I left Old Mister Coon a plenty to eat, so's it would hold him till I git back."

"You hain't a-goin, Tommy."

"You an Joe will stay home an take keer of the chores," Melinda told him. "Jack an the twins kin come with Pa an me an the gals. Thataway they won't be so much fightin this time while I'm gone."

"Aw, Mal Please let Joe an me go, too! S'posin Abe or his pa has come down sick. We'd come in handy to git in wood."

"Well, all right then. But no fightin, you hear me?"

Melinda shooed the chickens out of the house before she shut the door. Then the whole family climbed into the wagon. On the way to the Lincoln place Isaac remarked on the beautiful colors of the autumn leaves.

"Yes," said Melinda, "hit looks like the good Lord is makin the whole world pretty to comfort us poor mortals and help us forgit our trials an tribulations."

As they approached the Lincoln cabin, Tommy spoke up. "Look, Ma, you can't see a livin soul. Somethin shore is wrong."

Melinda hastily got down from the wagon seat. "Now, iffen they's somethin catchin, I don't want you young'uns a-comin in the house. You'uns stay here by the wagon, out

in the fresh air. Eunie, you hold Betsy by the hand." She hurried into the cabin, with Isaac close behind her.

Sarah sat on the edge of the bed, holding her ma's hand, while Abe and Tom, both looking tired and worried, sat on stools close by. Poor Nancy was gasping for breath and plainly burning up with fever.

"Lord, what a pity!" Melinda exclaimed, going to the bedside.

At the sight of her, Nancy smiled and seemed to perk up a little. "I'm shore glad you come, Lindy," she managed to say between gasps. "You'uns take off yore things an set down."

"Nancy brung some fresh butter," said Isaac, trying to sound cheerful. "Nothin would do her but to churn hit 'fore she come, so's she could bring you some." In a lower tone he asked Tom, "How long has she been ailin?"

"More'n a week now. I wanted to send Abe to fetch Lindy, but ever day Nancy'd say, 'Oh, I'll be better in the mornin. I jest need to rest a spell.' But she kep on a-gittin dizzy spells, an ever day she's been a-gittin weaker."

Neither Isaac nor Melinda asked whether Doc Kitchen had been sent for and if so, what he'd had to say, for both knew as well as Tom did that Doc Kitchen couldn't help here. And that was a thing nobody wanted to talk about out loud.

While Melinda and Sarah were trying to give Nancy a sip of cool water, Abe suddenly got up and ran out the door. Once outside, he began to cry like a baby.

Tommy came and stood beside him. "Abe, maybe she'll git well now. Ma'll know jest what to do for her."

"Tommy, you don't know how it is. Jest let yore ma git as sick as mine is, an you'll think of all the things you coulda done for her an didn't do."

Sarah had come out to get fresh water, and had heard.

"Abe, don't talk thataway," she begged. "You been a good boy. Tommy knows how you allus got in the wood and made the fars, an how you allus brung home game when Ma ast you to."

"Shore I do," said Tommy. "You been good to yore ma. You got no call to feel ashamed."

"You jest don't know. When you know you air li'ble to lose yore ma, you begin to study. So many things I coulda done different . . ."

Just then Melinda came to the door. "Abe, you an Sarah come inside. Yore ma wants you."

The boy and girl hurried inside, and Tom stood back to let them kneel beside their mother. Everyone could see that she was rapidly getting worse; the hand which she held out for Abe to hold felt as hot as fire.

Nancy knew better than anyone that her time was running short. "Abe, Sarah," she gasped, "I want you two to be good childern an mind yore pa. Abe, read yore Bible reg'lar, an take good keer of Sarah."

"I will, Ma, I will!"

"When the time comes, childern, we'll all meet on the other shore."

Now Nancy's eyes turned to Melinda. "Lindy, you air a good, religious woman. I'm right proud that you moved here amongst us."

Melinda wiped her eyes, and Abe and Sarah tried to hold back their sobs while they all waited for Nancy to gather the strength to go on. At last she said, "Abe is a boy, an he's old enough now so's he kin purty near take keer of himself. But Sarah—will you kinda look after her, Lindy?"

"You know I will, Nancy."

"Now I wanta talk to Tom."

The others stood back to let him kneel beside her. She patted his hand, looking at him fondly with eyes that the fever had made bright as stars.

"I'd like to stay a little longer, Tom. I do hate to leave you an the childern. But hit's God's will."

At first Tom couldn't speak, and buried his face in the quilt. After a minute he raised his head and begged, "O God, please let us keep her a while longer. I need her so, an the childern need her. Please, God, don't take her away!"

But now her hand on his was limp.

Melinda turned to Abe and Sarah and said, "She's gone. Try not to grieve too much. She's gone to a better land than this."

Sarah screamed. Melinda took the girl in her arms and admonished her. "Now, now, yore ma wouldn't want you to take on like this."

Abe was not there to be comforted; he had run off blindly into the woods.

Isaac touched Tom on the shoulder and led him outside, where out of habit, not really knowing what he was doing, Tom picked up a chunk of wood and started whittling.

Tommy was sent to give the neighbors the sad news, while Joe took the younger Garrisons back home. After a while Isaac felt he'd better arouse Tom from his deep study.

"Tom, hit's about time we started on the coffin."

"I know. Hit's got to be done. But Lord, how I hate to do it!" He looked around for Abe and found the boy standing silent beside him. "Abe, you whittle the pegs, so's they'll be ready when we need 'em."

Isaac and Melinda stayed overnight, and sometime during the evening Dennis Hanks, a cousin of Nancy's, appeared. Like Tom, with whom he had worked on various cabins, Dennis was a carpenter, and between them they made the coffin as fine a job as anybody could have wanted to see. When it was done, and when Melinda had washed Nancy and combed her hair and dressed her in her best dress, Dennis and Isaac lifted Nancy into it.

Early in the morning the neighbors began to arrive.

When the men asked Tom where he wanted the grave dug, he motioned to them to follow him, and led them to the crest of the hill where Betsy and Tom Sparrows were buried.

"Here's where she'd wanta be, boys, a-layin right beside 'em. I think hit's fittin."

By noon the grave was ready, and family and friends, walking slowly, followed the sled which bore Nancy Lincoln to her last resting place. Afterward everyone but Abe went back to the cabin. The women had all brought food, and the table was loaded with cold turkey, cornbread and fresh butter, cookies, and jugs of milk.

Lingering by the grave, Abe felt that at last he was alone with his mother and could talk to her the way he always had.

"Ma," he said, "you remember the time I killed one of yore little pigs, when you near tanned my hide an then let me off? That was about the first time Pa let me take his gun into the woods. Honest, Ma, I never meant to shoot the little pig. I had my sights lined up on a rabbit when that there little pig come along. I pulled the trigger too soon. The dang gun knocked me down, an when I got up, yore pore little pig was layin there a-squealin. I knowed hit was gonna die, so I knocked hit in the head with the gun and then I drug hit home. I hain't forgotten the look in yore eyes when you seen it, Ma; I knowed I hurt yore feelins. I was sorry, Ma, an I'm still sorry. The little pig did make good eatin, though, didn't hit?"

He felt better now for having had this talk with her. Looking over the bright-colored leaves on the trees, he selected the branches with the prettiest leaves, cut them, and laid them over the raw earth of the grave.

"I'll make yore grave real purty, Ma." Then, though it was hard to pull himself away, he said, "I better go; they'll be a-lookin for me. But I'll come back to see you ever day, Ma. I'll tell you ever'thing that happens to me."

*K*NOWING HOW LONESOME

the Lincoln cabin was going to seem without Nancy, Melinda and Isaac urged the Lincolns to come home with them for a few days. Tom and Sarah were glad of the invitation, but Abe hung back; he was thinking of his promise to visit the grave every day. Then he realized that he didn't want to stay home all alone, and that his pa wouldn't let him, anyway. Ma would understand when he explained.

"I'd admire to come," he said, "but I can't stay long. I hafta git back here."

Everyone looked puzzled, but Abe wouldn't say any more. His reason for wanting to hurry home was his and his ma's secret.

At the Garrison place, Tommy took Abe right away to see the coon.

"I hain't seen him yet today, an yestiddy he was actin kinda funny. Let's go see what he's doin."

Hunkering down to get a better view, the boys peered into the cage.

"I'll be dogged!" Tommy exclaimed.

In spite of his fresh grief, Abe had to laugh. "That shore hain't no he. That's a she."

"Old Mister Coon" now had two fuzzy little babies.

"Hain't they the cutest little things you ever laid eyes on?" Tommy cried. He reached into the cage and pulled one of the little mites out from under its mother. "Here, Abe, you want this one? Go on, you kin have hit. Hit'll be comp'ny for you."

For a moment Abe had almost forgotten his sorrow, but now it all came back, and he had a hard time keeping himself from crying like a baby again.

"Hit's shore purty, an I'm right thankful to you, Tommy, but I don't wanta take no critter away from hits ma. Hit wouldn't never be happy, nor hits ma either. Put hit back."

Tommy felt miserable, for he had been trying hard to get Abe's mind off his trouble. "An like a fool, I done exackly the wrong thing," Tommy thought.

Meanwhile Melinda was keeping Sarah distracted by seeing that the girl was busy every minute with some household chore. Melinda had the right idea: Sarah was far from happy, but she had no chance to brood. And when the boys came into the house for supper, Melinda took Tommy aside and whispered, "Think up somethin for you an Abe to do tomorrer. Hit don't matter what, so long as you keep him busy."

Tommy nodded. "Say out loud that somebody around here better shoot some meat for the pot, an we'll go a-huntin first thing in the mornin."

And so soon after daybreak Abe and Tommy went off, heading for the wildest part of the woods.

Sarah helped Melinda clear up after breakfast, and then Eunie and little Betsy took her by the hands and led her off to see Ma Coon. Jack came along with some food, and Joe brought a pan of fresh water.

"Look at them purty little babies," Betsy cooed. "Sarah, look at em a-suckin on their ma jest like kittens do."

When Jack put the food in the cage, Ma Coon paid no attention, but as soon as Joe gave her the pan of water, she got up and went over to it.

"Watch what she does now," Eunie urged. "Ever'thing she eats, she washes hit first."

With her handlike little paws, the coon took up a piece of pumpkin and swished it around in the water.

"Land's sake," said Sarah. "Hit's a sight cleaner than some humans."

Eunie told her, "Ma says she knows a plenty humans she'd a sight ruther eat after this here coon than them."

The twins, Johnny and Willie, came galloping up to see the babies. Joe gave them a sour look and said sternly, "Don't lemme ketch neither one of you brats a-doin nothin mean to these coons, you hear me?"

Jack chimed in, singling out Willie for warning, "Tommy will wear you to a frazzle iffen you so much as touch 'em."

"Hit's Johnny that does all the meanness," Willie whined.

"That's yore foot a-talkin," Johnny protested. "Who et all Ma's sugar, tell me that?"

"You did. I seen you a-doin hit," said Willie, smirking maliciously.

Johnny howled with indignation. "Ever'thing gits laid on me!" Backing off a little way, he began picking up sticks and throwing them at everybody, even Betsy. Then Joe rose to his feet, saying, "You little devil, I'm gonna whop you good!" Johnny promptly took out across the yard and dodged behind the house.

Later, when no one was in sight, Johnny sneaked back to Ma Coon's cage. He poked at the babies with a switch until they crawled under their ma, and then he got a stick and poked at the ma. All the time he kept a sharp lookout.

"Iffen Joe seen me, or iffен Tommy come back all of a sudden, I'd just hafta leave home," he thought. "But I'll be dogged iffен I'll let them old mossbacks tell me my business."

His stick broke and he looked for another, but then got a better idea. Sidling quietly into the house, he found a chunk of cornbread left over from breakfast and took that back to the cage.

"Lemme see you wash this here," he said, snickering.

Ma Coon tried to wash the cornbread the same way she did meat and other stuff, but the cornbread fell to pieces in the water, and she couldn't get a single bite.

"See," said Johnny, "you hain't so smart."

Toward evening Isaac and Tom came back from making some kind of trade with Nod Watson. Isaac looked in the cabin door and greeted Melinda and Sarah, who were both busy at the fireplace.

"Do I smell supper cookin?" he asked. "Don't know about Tom, but I'm so hongry I could eat a whole hog with the hair on."

"We'll eat jest as soon as Tommy and Abe git here," Melinda told him.

She and Sarah had made a good supper. In the big black pot which had sat all day in a nest of embers at one side of the hearth, there were beans with a big chunk of hog meat. Besides that, they had a hot, fresh pone of bread, fresh-churned butter, and a skilletful of fried pumpkin; and there was plenty of milk to drink.

By and by, though, the cornbread had begun to get cold and the beans and pumpkin were drying up, and still the boys had not come home.

"Tommy knows I don't like him to stay out so late when he's a-huntin," Melinda complained. "They's wild animals in them woods, an hit hain't safe there after sundown."

She waited a while longer, though Betsy and the twins were begging for their supper, but at last Isaac came in from the yard and said, "Well, let's eat. The boys kin jest eat when they git here."

After supper, as the twilight came creeping over the land, Melinda became really worried, and went out and walked up and down in the yard.

"Isaac, what you s'pose could be keepin them boys?"

"Stop frettin yoreself, Lindy," he told her. "They'll be along direckly."

Tom Lincoln also tried to reassure her. "Likely they shot more game than they kin carry, an they'll come a-draggin hit."

Full dark came, and still no Tommy and no Abe. Melinda was careful not to show her fear before Sarah and the children, but she found it hard to sit still by the fire.

"Pa, pull out the trundle bed," she said. "All you young-uns git to bed now."

Melinda never let the girls sleep in the loft, and it even worried her for the twins to sleep up there. One time in the old place over near Rockport, Eunie had rolled out of the loft in her sleep and broken her arm. Right after that, Isaac had made the trundle bed.

Soon Sarah said good-night and got in the trundle bed with Eunie and Betsy. Then Tom started nodding and climbed up to join the boys in the loft.

Isaac yawned. "Come on to bed, Lindy. Hit won't help Abe and Tommy none for you to fret."

"Oh, go on to sleep, Isaac—iffen you kin sleep, not knowin where them boys air. I'm gonna set right here till they come in."

Soon the cabin was quiet except for Isaac's snoring. Whenever Melinda heard a noise outside in the night, she would go look out the door. Then she'd come back to her chair and pray.

"Please, Lord, look after them boys. My time's a-comin soon, an I hain't afeard. Only one thing I ast, Lord: jest let them boys be home safe afore I'm took down."

At last from pure exhaustion she fell asleep in the chair. When she awoke, it was bright morning.

"Isaac," she said, shaking him, "the boys hain't come back, an look outside!"

The color of the sky told Isaac that he had overslept. He jumped up and pulled on his breeches. All he said was, "I better tend to the stock." But now he, too, was really worried.

Tom came down from the loft. "Iffen one of the boys was hurt," he said, "likely t'other would of come home for help. Looks like they went an got theirself lost."

Sarah heard this and turned white. Now her grief over the loss of her ma was pushed aside by worry about Abe.

"I remember the time I slapped him," she said. "An onst afore he was let to carry a gun, he snuck off with Pa's gun to go a-huntin, an I told on him. Jest let him git back safe, an I won't never tell on him again, no matter what he does."

"Now, don't take on," her pa told her. "Iffen them rascals don't git back real soon, we'll turn out the county an go a-lookin for 'em."

All morning the men just walked around in the yard, whittling. Melinda and Sarah kept themselves busy in the house. But by dinner time Melinda could stand it no longer. She began to wring her hands and cry. Then Isaac said, "Joe, you ride into town an ast all the fellows you find hangin around to come help us look. Tell 'em to bring their dogs."

Sarah wanted to go, too. "Iffen I don't do somethin quick, I'm li'ble to start runnin 'round an screamin."

They got to town in almost no time at all and ran into the store to tell their story.

"From what you say, Joe," said Old Man Brown, "them boys air lost in the wildest part of the woods. A man has a

time findin his way in them woods, let alone a boy." He shook his head. "Gone two days now, eh? Hit looks bad."

His wife Martha said, "Hit might go bad with Tommy Garrison's ma, what with all the worry."

The news spread through the little town like wildfire; it had already reached the saloon by the time Joe got there.

"I allus liked that Abe Lincoln," Old Josh Hart was saying. "A smart boy."

"Like as not, some varmint has got them boys," said Ben Weaver. "Them woods air full of b'ars an wolves an catamounts." Ben knew a lot of stories about people who had been killed by wild animals, and he was all set to tell them all. "I heard about a little gal onst that was et by wolves—" he began.

"Ben, you talk too much," Old Josh snapped. And to Joe, "That Ben Weaver is the laziest mortal on earth. Why, one time he let a hive of bees swarm on him cause he was too lazy to break out in a run. But he kin outtalk the world, jest to be talkin. Don't pay him no mind."

A little crowd gathered outside the store. Some people thought the boys would never be found and were goners for sure, but others were more hopeful. There was speculation on which dog would do best at picking up the trail. Charley Harper went home to get his bear dog, old Red-Eye, that Charley swore could "whop a b'ar" all by himself.

"Old Red-Eye will fight ary critter in the woods," he said, "an wear hit to a frazzle."

In little more than an hour a party of about a dozen men was ready to start out on the search. They hurried to the Garrison place, where Tom and Isaac and Melinda met them in the doorway.

Two or three spoke up all at once. "Don't you worry, Miz Garrison. We'll find them boys for you."

"Well, you won't have far to look," said Isaac, looking sheepish. "They air up in the loft now, sound asleep."

Just a little while before, the boys had come in, dragging their feet.

"Was either of 'em hurt?" somebody asked.

"No," said Tom, "they was jest lost. We ast about it, but they was too hongry an tuckered out to say a word."

"They et like wolves," Melinda said happily, "but they was a-noddin at the table. They was so tarred that when they started for the loft, I was afeard they'd never make hit up the pegs."

It was not until the next day at breakfast that the folks found out what had happened. The boys had gone deep into the woods, not sighting any game bigger than squirrels for quite a while. Then their luck had changed; they had got a couple of wild turkeys, and then a deer. It had been a big buck, too heavy to carry; after dragging it a little way, they had decided that it would be smarter to leave it and come back the next day with somebody to help. They had covered the carcass with brush and leaves in the hope that no wild animal would find it, and had hung the turkeys from a branch overhead to mark the spot, and then had started for home.

But after some hours of trudging through the woods, they had realized that they were lost.

"Turned out we was a-goin the wrong way all the time," said Abe. "Pa, was you ever lost?"

"No, not that I recollect."

"Hit's a terrible feelin; they's nothin worser. You walk an walk till you air ready to drop, an then find out you air jest as lost as you was before."

"Was you skeered?" Sarah asked.

"Won't say I warn't. The trees was makin long, black shadders, an then hit come on dark. We could hear some critter movin in the bresh, but couldn't tell what hit was."

"I don't wanta think about it," said Tommy. "Let's talk about somethin else."

"But then what did you do?" Willy insisted.

"We clumb a big tree an set in it, real close together."

"Tommy, you remember when you went to sleep?" said Abe. "Iffen hit hadn't been for me, you'd of fell out."

"That's right. But by that time I was so tarred I didn't give a damn what become of me. An come mornin, I was so hongry my belly was a-stickin to my backbone. We moseyed around some more. Finely we come to a place where we knew where we was at, and come on home. Lord A'mighty, home shore looked good!"

"Praise God!" said Melinda.

Later that day, while Tommy and Abe were visiting Ma Coon and her babies, they heard Isaac calling.

"You boys take the Lincolns' hoss an go git Doc Kitchen. Joe's gone on the mare for old Miz Hesson."

Old Mrs. Hesson was the local midwife. Knowing the reason for their errand, the boys didn't have to be told to hurry. On the way back, though, they took their time, letting Doc ride on ahead, for Tommy knew from previous experience that at times like this, boys were only in the way.

Sarah had taken the younger Garrisons to the woods to gather nuts. For a while Abe and Tom hung around in the yard with their pa's, feeling unwanted and getting more and more restless.

"Hit shore takes a long time for a young'un to git borned," said Abe.

"You know," said Tommy, "them turkeys an that deer would make mighty good eatin. The weather's been plenty cold enough to keep em good."

"Naw," his pa told him, "they'll be spiled now, lessen you gutted 'em."

"We gutted 'em."

"Well now, you boys got more sense than I ever give you credit for. Bet hit was Abe that thunk to do hit."

"You never give me credit for nothin, Pa," Tommy com-

plained. "I thunk of hit, too. Abe, what say we go git that deer now?"

Abe's pa spoke up. "No sense in good meat a-wastin. But I hain't a-riskin you rascals gittin lost agin. I'll go along, too."

Taking old Hunter, the Garrisons' hound, the three started out, and soon were deep in the woods.

"You boys shore now you kin find that buck?" Tom asked.

Both insisted that this time they knew their way. After an hour or so of walking, they were sure that they were near the place. Old Hunter was sniffing around in the woods, and every time he barked they thought he had found the deer.

But always he turned out to be barking about something else. By and by Tom said, "I think this is a wild-goose chase. Air you'uns shore you killed a deer? I don't keer iffen you did or didn't, jest so I git the truth."

The boys were hurt. "Cross my heart an pint to God," said Abe.

"We better turn back anyways," his pa decided.

Following Tom homeward, the boys lagged behind, scuffling through the leaves and kicking at sticks and stones to relieve their feelings. Tommy cussed under his breath. He had half a mind to keep old Hunter and just stay out in the woods till he found that damned deer.

Suddenly Abe exclaimed, "Look over yander! Hain't that the tree we slep' in?"

"Hit shore as hell is."

Calling to Tom, the boys broke into a run. Now they had their bearings, and in a short time they were able to point to the branch with the turkeys hanging from it.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Tom, when the deer was uncovered. "That's the finest buck I ever seen."

"Reckon we better cut hit up to carry hit?" Abe asked.

"No, we kin cut poles like the Injuns did. Them Injuns warn't so dumb." With the deer tied on a sort of litter of poles, they could drag it behind them without too much trouble.

As they neared the house, they heard a baby crying.

"By jiminy, hit's borned," said Tommy. "Listen, hit's a-cryin hits head off. That's what I hate." He ran ahead to meet Isaac in the yard and ask, "A boy or a gal, Pa?"

"Hit's a dishwasher, just like we wanted. We'll call her Lyddy."

*I*T WAS A SAD HOMECOMING for Tom Lincoln and his orphaned children. When they entered the empty cabin, no one said anything. Abe got busy making the fire, while Tom cut up their half of the deer that Abe and Tommy Garrison had killed. Sarah laid slices of the venison in the skillet and began stirring up a batch of cornbread.

Of course Sarah had offered to stay on with the Garrisons awhile to help with the new baby. But Isaac had said there was no need, that old Mrs. Hesson would stay for a few days. Melinda had told the girl, "Yore menfolks will need you at home to do for them."

Sarah worried now about her new responsibilities. What with keeping the house tidy and washing the clothes and doing all the cooking, she had her work cut out for her. She would have to remember every single thing her poor ma had taught her. Nancy had always bragged that Sarah did mighty well for a young girl, but when Sarah thought about making soap, for instance, all by herself, she felt helpless and scared.

As soon as the fire was going well, Abe left the house and headed up the hill to his mother's grave. His pa saw where Abe was going, and worried. "Now, that's the worst thing the boy kin do," Tom thought. "Mooning over the grave will jest keep him a-grievin that much longer."

At the grave Abe seated himself on a log and talked to Nancy just as if she were there in front of him, sitting in a chair. First he explained why he hadn't come during the past few days, as he had promised. Then he told her about killing the deer and getting lost and finding the deer again.

"When we was lost, Ma, when I was up in that tree in the dark, hearin things walkin around down below, I might of been plumb skeered to death. But I felt like you was there with me, kinda lookin after me, an I warn't afear'd.

"Ma, I wished they was some way you could let me know iffen you kin hear me. I feel like you do. Seems like God in His mercy would let you come back an be near us here at home. I'll always feel like you air right here, Ma, lookin down on us like a shinin star in the sky."

He told her about the Garrisons' new baby.

"I better git back to the house now, Ma. Sarah's a-cookin some of that deer meat. She misses you mighty bad, too."

Suddenly he burst out, "God, why did you hafta take Ma away?" But then he apologized to Nancy. "They say you air gone to a better life than you had here on earth. Don't think I begrudge hit to you." And to God, he added, "Lord, be good to her. She had some hard sleddin here on earth. I'm a-countin on you to make up to her for all she missed."

On the way back through the woods he was down-hearted, but in the cabin he was cheered a little by the good smell of the venison and of the coffee boiling in its pot at the side of the hearth.

Supper was eaten in silence, except for the usual prayer of grace, and afterward Abe and Sarah both went to bed

early. Tom, though, sat up for a long time beside the dying fire, smoking his old corncob and thinking. Sometimes he thought he saw Nancy's face looking at him from the embers.

Because of sitting up so late, he woke up late next morning. For a minute he stayed with his head buried in the covers; he was putting off the time when he would have to get up in the cold and build up the fire. But when he threw back the covers, he found that the room was warm, and there sat Dennis Hanks, baking his shins before a roaring blaze.

It had been many a year since Tom had got up in the morning to find the fire already made, and the warmth made him feel good all over. As he toasted his rear before the flames, he was filled with a friendly feeling for Dennis.

"Dennis, hit's mighty lonesome here for us now. What say you come an live here?"

Dennis was fond of the Lincolns, especially because everything he knew about carpentering, Tom had taught him. He spat in the fire and said, "Reckon I kin. Nothin to hinder me."

That first winter after Nancy's death was a hard one. When school started in December, Abe and Sarah had long miles to walk every day, usually in bitter weather. Once in a while, when Tom didn't need old Barney on the place, they could ride him to school, and that was a lucky day. Often Sarah had to stay home in order to keep up with the housework; then Abe would give her lessons in reading and spelling in the evenings.

Bad weather alone could rarely keep Abe home but he certainly had to bundle up. First he'd put on the deerskin shirt and breeches that his ma had made for him the year before. They were a little tight and short for him this year. But since he had no ma any more to make new ones, they had to do. Over the deerskin clothes he wore a heavy wool

coat, a hand-me-down from Dennis; when he turned up the collar of the coat and pulled down the flap of his coonskin cap against wind and flying snowflakes, all you could see of his face was his eyes peeping out.

For his feet he had whittled two pieces of wood, a good bit longer than his shoes, which he would warm at the fire before he tied them on with strips of rawhide. With these contraptions he could slide over deep snow instead of floundering in it. They came in handy during the spring thaw, too, for sliding over mud. Most people didn't travel much at that time of year, for the mud was so bad on the roads that a horse would get tired in no time; in some spots a wagon would sink to the hubs, so that a man would have to go and borrow an extra team of oxen to get it loose.

Spring came late that year, but better late than never. Now Abe started out for the woods every morning, carrying his ax on his shoulder and his lunch inside his shirt. All day he felled trees to clear more land. The little wild creatures of the woods got used to him and played all around the edge of the clearing. Sometimes he would stop working to watch a squirrel scamper up a tree and then sneak back down to get the crumbs which Abe had left for him. Two or three times, out of the corner of his eye, Abe saw a deer dart past. He would wish then that he had his gun along, so that he could take some fresh meat home to Sarah. But then he would be glad he didn't have his gun, for if the deer was a doe, there would be fawns hidden in some thicket, waiting for her.

When the first spring flowers appeared, he picked a handful to lay on his mother's grave. Some came up by the roots, and he held them up to shake off the dirt, but then changed his mind. Why not plant them on the grave? He liked the idea so well that he dug up enough plants to cover the whole grave with a blanket of bloom.

"Look what I brung you, Ma," he said. "You allus

liked flowers. Remember the last time I brung you some, while you was still alive? Yore eyes got bright as a new dollar. You looked as proud as iffen I'd brung you a new dress. I bet you'll be proud of these here flowers, too."

He left the grave reluctantly, as always. But again as always when he came down the hill and saw the blue smoke curling from the cabin chimney, joy stirred in his heart; home was a fine sight. And when he got there he was powerfully hungry.

"I wish sometime Sarah would surprise me with a batch of them fried dried-apple pies, like Ma useta do," he thought. It had been a long time since he'd had this favorite dish, for Sarah either never thought of making fried dried-apple pies, or else didn't have the hang of it.

The supper she had ready was hearty and good, though—bear meat, beans, buttermilk, and hot bread. Sarah was learning more about cooking right along.

"Ever'thing's a-gittin to taste jest like old times," Abe told her.

"Aw, shucks," said Sarah, blushing with pleasure.

"Sarah lets on like she don't want nobody to brag on her," said her pa, "but I take notice that when you do, she allus outdoes herself to please you."

Now she was setting out a crock of the wild-grape preserves that Nancy had made by putting in a layer of grapes, then a layer of sorghum, then more grapes, and so on. This was food fit for a king.

"All this housework is too much for the child," Tom was thinking. "Her and Abe need somebody to mother 'em."

A hail came from the yard, and Tommy Garrison walked in the door.

"Howdy, all."

"This cold weather shore does hang on," said Dennis, pointing a spoon at Tommy's deerskin breeches. "Looks like we'll be a-wearin our skin clothes all summer."

"I'd of snuck out in my jeans," said Tommy, "iffen Ma would of turned her back a minute. But she smelled a rat an kep' her eye on me till I put on these here, like she told me. And by thunder, she was right. All the way over I been a-leanin on that east wind, an hit's cold enough to freeze yore hind sights off."

"Set down an have some b'ar meat," said Sarah. "How's little Lyddy?"

"All right, I reckon, but she cries a lot. Ma keeps Betsy a-rockin her all the time. You oughta see the cradle me an Pa made her. Used bee gum, an hit's a dandy. Abe, I'm aimin to go in the cradle-makin business. With all the gals a-gittin married that I hear about, they'll be a rush for 'em soon. You wanta go in partners with me?" And to Tom, "Iffen you still aim to raise more hogs this year, Mr. Lincoln, Pa says he has some shoats to swap or sell. An Ma says when you come over to see 'em, make hit on a Sat'day an bring the whole fam'ly for dinner."

"We'll do that soon's the plantin's done," said Tom.

Abe took Tommy outside to show him the new clearing. "Iffen Pa keeps a-buyin more hogs all the time, we'll hafta raise a sight of corn."

As soon as Tommy had gone, Tom Lincoln and Dennis and Sarah went to bed. Abe, though, stayed by the fire for a while. The urge came on him to practice his writing. As usual he had no paper, but he took the wooden shovel he had whittled for his ma, and with a charred stick from the fire, wrote on it:

Abe Lincoln
His pen in hand.
If Sarah won't work
I'll see if I can.

"I kin write purty good now," he thought.

Next morning at breakfast, Tommy reported on his visit to the Lincolns.

"You know, Pa, I think Mr. Lincoln's a-sparkin. He was kinda slicked up; had his hair cut, an his beard was trimmed. I never seen him thataway when Miz Lincoln was alive."

"Now, that's one thing I hate to see," said Melinda. "Jest as soon as a woman dies, her man starts a-sprucin up. He'll shave or trim his beard; he'll git his hair cut an smear goose grease all over hit. Then he starts right out a-lookin for another woman." She looked sharply at her husband. "Iffen I thought you'd do that, Isaac Garrison . . ."

Isaac laughed. "You die, Lindy? Why, yore people never die. They jest turn to a whetstone."

"You know better'n that," she snapped. "Look at yore old gran'dad. Iffen that hoss hadn't kicked him, he'd be here right now, a-bossin you around. He was a mean old devil, an you know that's the truth. I bet you air glad you turned that hoss loose that day."

"Will you hush? Onst you git started on me, you never know when to shut yore mouth."

"You come over here, Isaac Garrison. I'm gonna cut yore hair right now." She pushed him into a chair and went to work on him with her scissors. "Now hold still, 'fore I cut yore ear. You air more hairier than a animal. No need to wait till I'm dead."

*I*SAAC, DID I EVER TELL YOU about my old sweetheart back in Kentucky?" Tom asked when he came to get the shoats he was buying.

Isaac shook his head.

"Afore I married Nancy, I was a-courtin another gal. A real pretty gal, name of Sally Bush. Figgered I was shore to git her, but jest when I was about to pop the question, along come this feller Dan'l Johnston, dressed fit to kill an ridin a good hoss. Reckon that took her eyes. Besides, he was a better-lookin man than me, an maybe she figgered she couldn't stand to see this ugly mug of mine on t'other side of the table three times every day. Anyways, after she seen this Johnston feller, she didn't pay me much more mind. I seen I wasn't gittin nowheres, an jest walked off. She married him, an I married Nancy.

"Well, later I heard talk Sally was plumb sick of her bargain. Folks said she said she was sorry she didn't marry me, instead. Don't know how much truth they was in that, but I know he never made much of a livin for her. Now

jest lately I heard he died an left her with three young'uns to raise."

Tom was whittling thoughtfully, with slow strokes. He paused to bite off a fresh chew, and Isaac waited. Isaac had a pretty good idea of what was coming next.

"I been a-thinkin," said Tom. "Sally turned me down onst, an she might do hit agin. But maybe I'd have a chanst with her now. I been a-thinkin I might ride back to Kentucky some of these days an find out. You think that would be a wild-goose chase?"

"She can't do no worse than say no," said Isaac.

"Well, I been a-thinkin."

Summer now was slipping away, and the corn stood higher than a man in the Lincolns' new clearing. All summer Abe had faithfully tended the flowering plants on Nancy's grave, as he had promised.

"Ma, you don't git too lonesome, do you? I shore hope not. You got a plenty of birds an all the little squir'ls here to keep you comp'ny.

"Pa and me both love you, Ma. We get powerful lonesome sometimes, too. Well, good-bye till tomorrer evenin."

When he came down the hill, he saw that his pa was waiting for him. Tom sat on a stump, whittling and watching the hogs eat. This was nothing unusual at this time of the evening, but tonight he had the look of somebody who was waiting.

"Come here, son."

"What is hit, Pa?"

"I been aimin to have a talk with you, Abe. I been a-watchin you, an I seen you go up the hill to the grave ever evenin. Son, you'll hafta quit that. Hit jest keeps the sorer fresh in yore mem'ry. She's gone. I want her back, too, more'n you know, but they's nothin we kin do. God took her

away, what for we don't know, but we jest got to figger that the good Lord knows His business."

"Pa, the day we put Ma up there, I promised her I'd come back ever day an tell her what went on."

Tom saw the stubborn set of the boy's face and wisely decided to say nothing more, at least right then. He shook his head in puzzlement and worry.

After supper Tom pushed away his plate with the air of a man who has made a decision. "Sarah, Abe, I got somethin to tell you." He lit up his pipe and took a few slow puffs, then said, "I believe yore ma would want me to git another woman in here to look after the house an cook for us all. I know a real fine woman over in Kentucky, one I knowed afore I knowed yore ma. One of these days I'm a-goin over there an see kin I bring her back with me. You children wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Naw, I reckon not," said Abe, after some thought.

"Not iffen hit'll make you happy, Pa," said Sarah.

"I want hit to make us all happy," Tom insisted.

"When you figger on goin?" Abe asked.

"Soon's we git the crops in."

Early one morning Tom saddled up old Barney and rode off to Kentucky, and a couple of days later alighted in the dooryard of Sally Bush's cabin.

A young girl was in the yard, hanging out washing on the bushes, and just as Tom arrived, a smaller girl and a little boy came running up. The little boy was obviously in a happy mood. He ran straight to Tom and held up cupped hands to show him something.

"Look, mister. I jest caught a toadfrog."

Laughing, Tom peered at the toad and agreed that it was a pretty one.

Sally had been behind the house, doing her washing, and

hadn't seen Tom come up. Now, in answer to the older girl's call, she came around to the front, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Land's sake, iffen hit hain't Tom Lincoln!"

Her face flushed with pleasure at the sight of him. To Tom she looked nearly as pretty as she had when he'd last seen her, a good many years before.

"Yep, hit's me. How air you, Sally?"

"Tom, where in the world did you come from, after all these years?"

"I live over in Indiana, in Warrick County. Hit's real purty country there. These here yore childern, Sally?"

"Yes. I have three mighty fine young'uns, iffen I do say so myself." She presented the older girl, Elizabeth, the younger, Matilda, and Johnny, her baby.

"Son, hain't you afeard you'll git warts from that there frog?" Tom asked Johnny.

"He wouldn't keer iffen he did," said Sally. "I hafta make Tilda watch him all the time, 'cause that child hain't afeard of nothin. Why, he'd likely pick up a snake, and they's plenty of 'em 'round here."

All three children seemed to like the tall stranger, and Tom knew he'd have no trouble making friends with them.

"Come in the house an set down," Sally invited him.

Elizabeth went back to hanging clothes and the two young ones scampered off, and Tom and Sally went inside. Everything in the cabin looked neat, Tom noticed. He had no doubts that Sally would make a good home for his motherless children, if she'd have him.

"Well, Tom, hit's right nice to see you agin. How many young'uns have you got? Or maybe you hain't got none."

"Sally, I got two of the best childern God ever let be born."

She laughed. "That's a good way to feel about 'em."

"Yep, my Abe is real smart. Now, there's a boy that craves learnin; he don't hardly ever miss a day of school. An my oldest, Sarah, was allus a good girl. She keeps house pretty good, too, for a gal her age; gettin better at hit right along. You see," he explained, "their ma died about a year ago."

Sally expressed her sympathy. Tom got his pipe going and took a few slow puffs.

"Well, Sally, that's how hit is. You an me both got some mighty fine young'uns, but I got no wife an you got no husband."

Sally looked down at her lap and a little pink came into her cheeks again. Tom noticed, and figured he'd got off to a pretty good start. Courting was bound to take a little time, of course, but he hoped it wouldn't be too long. How soon, he wondered, would it be wise to pop the question?

"I got a good farm, a purty place," he said. "The school's a good ways off but the church hain't fur."

"I'm right glad to hear you air makin out so well."

Tom leaned forward eagerly. "Sally, you an me have knowed each other a long time, you might say since we was childern. You know I thunk a lot of you, way back there, an they was a time when you liked me a right smart. Hain't that right?" Suddenly he decided to come right out with it. "I made this trip over here to see iffen you'd marry me."

Sally gave a little gasp. "Well, Tom, I'll hafta think that over."

Tom nodded; he had expected that. Then his heart skipped a beat, for he saw how she was blushing and how bright her eyes were.

"I'd hafta talk to Elizabeth," she said. "Elizabeth's a big gal now. Iffen I jest up and married somebody an didn't even ast her what she thinks, hit would hurt her feelins."

"A course."

This seemed like the right moment for Tom to take his leave, but he got permission to come back the next day.

Sally thought hard for some hours, and along toward evening she had a talk with her older daughter.

"Honey, hit's mighty lonesome here sometimes, with jest us by ourselves. Seems like we need a man around the house. A home hain't complete withouten one."

Elizabeth was old enough to know what her ma was working around to. "What man, Ma? That Mr. Lincoln that was here today?"

Sally nodded. "He wants to take us back with him to Indiana. He's got a nice home there, an good farmin land. They's a gal about yore age, an a boy a mite younger."

"He seems like a right nice man," Elizabeth said thoughtfully. "Hit might be the best thing."

Matilda had overhead. "Where at is Indiana, Ma?"

"Hit's acrost the Ohio River."

"Air we a-goin there?"

"Maybe so."

Matilda jumped up an down in delight, then ran out of the house, calling, "Johnny, Johnny!"

She found her brother down the hill a little ways, and gave him the news. "Johnny, we air a-goin somewheres. Clear acrost the big river!"

Johnny, too, was delighted with the prospect of such a great adventure, but he insisted, "I gotta ketch that old frog first. He run away from me."

Matilda helped him chase the bounding hoptoad and caught it for him, and then the two rushed back to the house. All through supper and even after they had been tucked into the trundle bed, they badgered Sally. "Ma, when air we a-goin to Indiana? Kin we start now?"

Next day Sally woke up early with her mind fully made up. When Tom arrived in the midmorning, she already had some of her things packed.

"The young'uns seem to think a right smart of you, Tom," she told him. "I'm ready to marry you any time you say."

He took her in his arms. "Hit can't be too soon to suit me."

Sally had a request to make of him. "I'd like right well to take my furniture along, or anyways some of hit. Hit would kinda make me feel more at home in Indiana."

"Then we'll take ever stick, darlin'."

That afternoon, after making arrangements with the preacher, he rode over to his sister's place and made a deal with her husband for the use of a wagon and team. Tom made sure that the wagon was big enough to haul furniture as well as children.

The morning air was crisp and the sun was bright when Sally Johnston stepped out of her cabin to go with Tom Lincoln to the preacher's house. Elizabeth ran after her to rearrange her mother's shawl and give a last touch to the bow of ribbon in her hair. Then Elizabeth ran back to stand in the doorway with the two young ones. The three of them waved and called, "Good-bye, Ma Johnston." They were laughing because this was the last time they would be able to call her that.

Since old Barney had been left with Tom's brother-in-law until the wagon and team could be returned, the bride and groom walked to their wedding. They went hand in hand, like a couple of school children.

"Honey, I hope the day will never come when you'll regret this," said Tom.

"Well, I thought hit over, an I figgered you'd make me a good man." She looked up at him with a twinkle in her eye. "You notice hit didn't take me long to make up my mind."

Tom saw that she was blushing, and he squeezed her hand.

"Tom, you remember that day you come to see me, an

Dan'l Johnston rode up an I made a little fuss over him, an you up an walked off?"

"I shore do. I was a-cussin the whole world that day."

"Tom, I want you to believe this. I didn't want you to think you was the only apple on the tree, but I never meant for you to go off like that. An when you did, I kep' a-hopin you'd come back. You left a lotta sadness behind you that day, an that sadness is jest now a-leavin me." Now her eyes were shining like stars. "T'other day when you come along, the minute I seen you my heart started poundin so hard I was afeard you'd hear it. An when you ast me to marry you, I said a prayer an thanked the good Lord for bringin back the only man I ever loved."

"God bless you, Sally." He put an arm around her shoulders and held her tight. "To tell the truth, you've been on my mind, too, all these years. Nancy made me a good wife, but they was a plenty of times I'd be a-lookin at her an I'd wished hit was you. But now we kin start again where we left off. In jest a few minutes you'll be all mine."

Within the hour they were pronounced man and wife. Tom signed his name in the register, and Sally made her mark. Knowing that Sally hadn't had much happiness with Daniel Johnston, the preacher and his wife were extra hearty in wishing the newlyweds much happiness and many long years to enjoy it.

All the way back to Sally's cabin she and Tom were laughing like children; and loading the wagon, with the young ones helping, was like a party. Tom arranged the load with extra care, for they would have several days of riding over rough, deeply rutted roads. He hoped the little ones wouldn't get too restless. Of course, they could run along beside the wagon when they felt like it, and then take naps on the featherbed. Sally and Elizabeth would take turns sitting in the rocking chair.

At the last minute Johnny came staggering toward the wagon, carrying a big old hound dog in his arms. It was plain he had no intention of going off to Indiana without his dog.

"Let him take it," Tom told Sally. "Hit'll make him feel at home, jest like the furniture will you."

Tom lifted boy and dog together and set them on top of the load. And so they started off, with the boy clutching his hound tightly and happily feeding it the cheese which Sally had given Johnny for his own lunch.

"Hain't this fun?" Matilda caroled, bouncing up and down.

"Giddap," said Tom, slapping the team with the reins. "Well, Miz Lincoln, we air a-goin home."

*A*BE," SARAH CALLED, "HERE comes Pa with a passel of comp'ny."

She and Abe had known, of course, that their pa had gone courting a woman with children of her own, but in the minds of the young Lincolns the prospect of having a whole family of strangers come to live with them had not seemed quite real. Seeing the wagon piled high with furniture, they were completely bewildered for a moment.

Their pa came forward, grinning happily. "Children, this is yore new ma, an these here are her young'uns. You'uns will like her and them fine."

As the Johnston children were introduced, one by one, Abe and Sarah hung back a little, though Sarah's eyes lit up at the sight of a girl her own age.

"Yore pa's told me what good children you'uns air," said Sally. "I jest know we'll all be happy together."

Her heart went out immediately to the sad-eyed boy and she held out her hand to him, but Abe shied away from it.

Of course he pitched in and helped Pa unload the furniture. When the new ma had it all arranged to suit her, Abe had to admit to himself that the house looked more homey than before; and when Sally unpacked some seashells and set them on the mantelboard, he was fascinated. Still, the house now looked uncomfortably strange.

As soon as he could do so without being impolite, he slipped away and started up the hill to tell his dead ma about this new development.

"Likely they's no need," he thought. "Maybe from where God took her, she kin look down an see ever'thing. That might not be sech a good thing. S'posin she was to look down an see this new woman bein mean to me or Sarah, maybe a-tryin to whale us; Ma wouldn't like hit."

At the crest of the hill he found Sarah kneeling in the shadow of one of the giant oaks that sheltered the grave. She was crying her heart out.

"Oh, Abe," she sobbed, "sometimes I git so lonesome for Ma, I jest feel like I can't go on."

Abe knelt beside her.

"Hit's been 'most a year now since they put her here," said Sarah.

"Yep. A long year."

"Now a new ma. What next year will bring, God only knows."

"Maybe hit won't be so bad," said Abe, trying to comfort her. "They'll be less work for you now."

He tried hard to think of a way to distract her. "Look, Sarah, you see where I planted all them flowers last spring? A course they air all dead now, but next spring they'll come up again. We wanta keep Ma's grave allus lookin purty." A thought occurred to him. "The new woman brung some real purty shells—did you see? Reckon she got 'em from the Ohio River. Maybe she'd give us them shells to put on the grave."

"Maybe. We could watch for a good time to ast her."

For a long time they stayed by the grave, with Sarah crying quietly. It seemed strange to Abe that the little squirrels could go on scampering merrily around in the presence of his and Sarah's sorrow.

"Look, Sarah," he said after a while, "we hadn't oughta grieve so much for Ma. Miz Brown at the store says God took her 'cause He has work for her to do. Maybe she's somebody's guardian angel—maybe ourn."

Sarah dried her eyes. "I never thought of that. Well, iffen she's ourn, we don't never need to be afeared of goin wrong."

At last they rose and went back down the hill. When Sarah saw the smoke curling from the cabin chimney, she said, "Look, Abe, they've built the far up. Looks like they air a-gittin supper ready. Now, that's right nice of 'em."

Sure enough, Sally and Elizabeth had a good supper on the table. Abe's eyes popped when he saw the fried dried-apple pies—a big pile of them.

"Bless my soul, Miz Lincoln," he said—he knew he could never learn to call her Ma—"iffen you hain't went and made the thing I love best in this world."

Sally was pleased, for she was trying hard to make Tom's children like her. "Eat all you want, Abe, my boy."

When she had filled the dishpan after supper, she picked up the soap and looked at it.

"That there is some of my Ma's own soap," said Sarah.

"Land's sake, how'd she git hit so purty an white?"

"That was her secret. People come from miles around to git her to show 'em how she made it, but she never told no one the secret. Hit must of been some kind of ash she used."

"I allus heard hick'ry ash was the best for either hom'ny or soap," said Sally. "Didn't she even tell you?"

"No. She learned me a lotta things, but some things she jest went ahead with by herself. She was allus a-trying to

take the hard work offen me. She said she'd had to work hard all her life, but she warn't a-goin to see me ruin my health."

"Honey, I know you had a wonderful ma," said Sally, speaking slowly. "I know I can't never take her place in yore heart or Abe's an I hain't a-tryin to do that. But I'll try to treat you right an make a home for you jest like she would; I'll allus do jest what I think she'd do offen she was here. I wanta git along with you an Abe, an I do want you two childern to be happy."

Some days later when Abe went up to the grave in the evening, Sarah followed him, and they sat down on Abe's log and talked things over.

"I reckon this new ma is the nearest thing to a real ma that Pa could of brung home," said Abe. "She acks like she really likes us. She kin shore cook, too."

"I took notice yestiddy how much hom'ny you et," said Sarah, smiling, "an how you kinda livened up afterwards. Yes, she's real good to us. I guess I like her as well as I could anybody exceptin our own ma. Elizabeth is right nice, too."

"Mm-hm. Looks like Dennis has took a shine to her—him that allus acted like he was skeered of females."

"He shore has. He talks a lot more'n he useta, an he looks at her all the time, that certain way." Sarah paused. "Abe, you know Tilda says she *likes* to wash dishes?"

"Well, that's a good thing. I remember how you useta let 'em set sometimes till I'd hafta light in an wash 'em to keep Ma from whalin you."

They laughed, and then Sarah said, "I'd like to go see the Garrisons an see how little Lyddy's a-gittin along. Maybe we could ride over."

"Miz Garrison keeps a-saying why don't you and me come over an stay two-three days. You think Pa would let you?"

"Naw, I guess not. Since Ma died, ever time I wanta go

someplace, he puts his foot down. Says he don't hold with young gals a-running 'round."

"I think that's jest cause he was lonesome. Now he's got this other fam'ly, maybe he won't mind so much. We'll ast him."

They picked some late asters and stuck them in the ground at the foot of the grave, then walked back to the house. Abe looked in the door and saw just what he had been hoping for—fried dried-apple pies.

"We'll eat jest as soon as they're all here," Sally told him, and stuck her head out the door to call, "Tom, Johnny, Tilda, supper's on."

In no time everyone was at his place at the table—everyone but little Johnny. Elizabeth went out in the yard to get him; the others could hear her calling, the sound fading as she went farther from the house.

"We was a-playin in the shed a little while back," said Matilda. "I told him supper was near ready."

"Wonder what coulda become of that boy," said Sally, looking worried. "I got a good notion to whale him for this."

Tom rose from the table. "I better look around for him. He coulda wandered off somewheres."

"Ma, I'm hongry," Matilda wailed. "Kin we eat now?"

"No, you know Pa likes ever'body here together at meal-times. An don't start a-nibblin, or you'll make all the others wanta eat. I know I couldn't touch a bite till I know where Johnny's at."

She followed Tom outside, and Sarah and Matilda went after her to help look. Abe lingered for a moment, eying the pies. As he got up from the bench he reached out and grabbed one of them; it seemed that he just couldn't help it. Hastily he gobbled it, then wiped his mouth with his hand and went out to join in the search.

Elizabeth was back, all out of breath. She had run all the

way to the graveyard, calling all the way, and had found no sign of Johnny.

Now Tom took charge, sending each person to search in a different direction. "Abe, you take the woods over that-away. Tilda, you git back in the house, honey; don't want you a-gittin lost, too."

As he trudged through the darkening woods, Abe thought of the time when he and Tommy Garrison had got themselves lost. He remembered how it had felt to sit up all night in a tree, hearing some animal snuffling around in the bush. And Johnny was just a little fellow.

"Consarn him," Abe said aloud, "iffen I ketch him away over here, I'm a-gonna wear him out." As he spoke, Abe realized how fond he had become of the little boy. If anything had happened to Johnny, Abe Lincoln was going to be mighty miserable.

Meanwhile Matilda, in the cabin, was eying the pies, and as with Abe, the temptation proved too strong for her. Just as she grabbed one, she thought she heard someone coming back, and so she hurried up the pegs to the loft. Sitting on the edge of the pallet, she ate the pie down to the last crumb, then licked her fingers.

The warm food in her stomach made her sleepy. Maybe it was her duty to stay awake and worry about Johnny, but she thought, "I can't do nothin iffен Pa won't let me." Thinking to take just forty winks, she lay back and reached for the quilt to pull it over her.

The quilt did not come easily, and she noticed now that it was all wadded up into a big lump. When she pulled harder on the corner that she held, the lump stirred and muttered.

"Johnny!"

She jerked the quilt off him and shook him furiously. "I bet Ma gives you a good thrashin. Ever'body's out a-lookin

for you all over the county, an you here asleep. Supper's ready."

She hurried him down the pegs and out into the yard. Tom and Sally were walking back toward the house together, talking in troubled tones about what they would do next if Johnny wasn't found before dark. Matilda ran to meet them, dragging her sleep-befuddled brother by the hand.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," said Tom. When he and Sally heard where Tommy had been found, they both burst out laughing, and laughed till the tears ran down their faces.

Johnny joined in the hallooing to call back Abe and Dennis and the girls, and at long last the family was reunited around the table. Tom said his usual prayer of grace, but this time he hurried it a bit.

"Pa's hongry, too," Abe thought, nudging Sarah.

As if in answer, Tom said, "Well, Ma, let's eat. I'm starved.

"Looks like somebody's been at them pies," Elizabeth remarked.

Abe and Matilda both keep still and looked innocent, and to Abe's great relief, no fuss was made about the matter. Though some of the food was cold and some was scorched, nobody seemed to mind much, for now everyone was in a happy mood. At the end of the meal Sarah and Abe exchanged looks, telling each other without words, "Now is the time to ask about the shells."

Abe didn't quite have the nerve, and so Sarah brought up the subject of her ma's grave, telling how Abe had planted the flowers and how the two of them wanted to make it look pretty. After beating about the bush awhile, she came out with it and asked for the shells.

"Why, shore," Sally answered without hesitation. "They couldn't be no better use for 'em."

After this success the brother and sister felt ready to tackle their pa on the question of a visit to the Garrisons. Tom had gone out to his favorite stump by the hog pen.

"That allus means he's either worried or he's happy," said Abe, "an he hain't worried now, so let's ast him."

This time Abe did the talking. At first Tom didn't answer, just spat and went on whittling. Sarah looked at Abe with sad eyes, as if to say, "He hain't a-gonna let me go," and started to walk away on dragging feet. But Tom said, "I don't mind her a-goin to Isaac's place, but mind you, don't stop in Loafer Station on the way. Them men that hang around the saloon hain't fittin for a gal to be around. I've heard some mighty raw stories in Brown's store, too. Iffen both of you promise me you'll go straight to the Garrisons', you kin go."

Light-footed now, Sarah ran back to the house to tell Sally and Elizabeth.

"You kin wear my dress iffen you want," Elizabeth offered.

This dress, which Sally had dyed with elderberry juice, was one that Sarah especially admired. When Sarah held it up in front of her to see how it would look, Sally and Elizabeth agreed that the purplish blue with Sarah's blue eyes and dark hair made a real picture. Sally looked among her own things and found a bow of ribbon for Sarah's hair.

On a sudden impulse, Sarah threw her arms around Sally and hugged her. "Ma, I'm real glad you married Pa. They's a big difference in Pa since you come here—you an Elizabeth an the little ones. An you make Abe an me real happy, too."

*R*AIN HAD FALLEN DURING the night, and the dawn, though clear, was mighty cold. Isaac was building up the fire and Melinda was hurrying the girls into their clothes, when Joe came running to the door.

"Ma, Pa, the wolves got the red calf!"

"Oh, dear heavens," Melinda cried, "an hit a heifer!"

"Soon's I went outside, I seen the cows all kinda huddled together, so I moseyed over to the cow lot to see what ailed 'em. She was a-layin there, half et."

Isaac stormed out of the house, cussing, and in two shakes Tommy and the twins tumbled down from the loft and ran out after him. When they and Joe came back to the house for breakfast, the boys were all talking at once and Isaac was still cussing.

"Ma, I was skeered," Willie confessed.

The twins had been running through the tall, wet weeds, and their breeches were damp.

"My bottom's froze," said Johnny.

He and Willie both let down their breeches and backed up close to the fire. Old Hunter, who had sneaked in a while

before to snooze by the hearth, stood up, stretched, and gingerly touched his cold nose to Johnny's behind. Johnny yelped and jumped a foot high. Old Hunter turned away and calmly trotted out of the house.

"Dang that dog! Iffen he ever does that agin, I'll kill him. My heart come up into my mouth."

At breakfast Isaac said, "Joe, Tommy, you'uns git to work on that fence today, so's we kin keep them dang wolves out. The twins kin help you. Not Jack; he's lookin kinda pale."

"Wished I was still puny," Tommy sighed.

"I'm ridin over Gentryville way today," Isaac told Melinda. "Wanta do a little tradin."

"Isaac Garrison, you air a tradin fool. I reckon they's jest no cure for hit."

After two or three hours of hard work on the fence, Tommy was glad to hear a hail summoning him to the house.

"Tommy, here's Abe an Sarah."

Sarah in her borrowed blue dress and Abe in his Sunday clothes both looked a bit proud of themselves. All the Garrisons were pleased to see them. Sarah led the way into the cabin to see little Lyddy, who was sound asleep in her cradle.

Of course the young Lincolns asked after Mr. Garrison, and when they were told that he had gone off trading, Sarah remarked, "Reckon he won't be back till suppertime, then."

"Depends on how far he goes; for one thing," said Melinda. "Then, iffien he sees somethin he wants an the feller hain't anxious to sell, Isaac'll wait around. Sometimes he's gone two-three days; I'll look for him when I see him." She shook her head ruefully and added, "Lord only knows what he'll come home with this time. But anyways, he hain't a cheatin man, like some I know around here."

Tommy nudged Abe and winked, and as soon as they were outside, said, "That's all Ma knows." With unconcealed

pride he stated, "My pa would cheat his own gran'ma iffen he had the chanst."

Abe wanted to see how the coons were doing.

"Them critters has growed so dang big," said Tommy, "I hafta either build 'em a bigger cage or else turn 'em loose. Iffen I turned 'em loose, you think they'd run off?"

Abe, always slow to answer, thought this over. "Well, maybe not. The ma's been penned up so long, likely she's used to hit, an the young'uns don't know no other home."

"I'm gonna try hit."

When the coons saw their cage door standing open, at first they didn't know what to make of it. After a minute Ma Coon came out, sniffing around cautiously, and the young ones hesitantly followed.

"Now iffen we kin jest keep the dogs offen 'em," said Tommy. "Watch 'em now. Hey, wait—aw, shucks."

The coons had disappeared into the woods.

"Dog take 'em," Tommy said bitterly. "Iffen I ketch 'em agin, I'll put 'em right back in this here cage an keep 'em there till their old age. I'll—I'll give 'em to Ma to cook up with a batch of sweet taters."

"Aw, you don't mean that," Abe protested.

"Well, naw. But now I'm skeered the dogs'll git 'em."

"Bet they don't. Coons is real smart," Abe said by way of consolation. "Maybe they'll hang around the place. When hit's a-comin on dark we kin watch for 'em."

After dinner Tommy suggested, "Let's go over to the Station an see what we kin pick up."

His ma raised an eyebrow when she saw him washing up and combing his hair in the middle of the day.

"Thought you was s'posed to work on that fence today," she said.

"Aw, Joe kin make out all right. Abe an me wanta take a little walk."

"Well, seein you got comp'ny, all right. Jest so you don't go over to the crossroads." "Crossroads" referred to Loafer Station.

"No'm," Tommy answered dutifully.

The boys had taken hardly a step when Melinda called them back. "I know as soon as you two air out of sight, you'uns'll make a beeline for the Station. So git me a spool of thread for my mendin. An tell Brown I want five pounds of sugar, too."

Tommy laughed. "Hain't much use buyin sugar, Ma. You know them twins'll steal hit."

"My land, yes. You know, Abe, hit don't matter where I hide hit; them little devils find hit ever time. Onst I hung the sack up to the ceilin, an they punched a hole in the sack an caught the sugar when hit run outen the hole. Isaac took 'em to the woods that time an plumb wore 'em out, but hit didn't do no good. This time I aim to set the sack right out on the table an then go out in the yard. What's left when I come back, I'll make 'em eat ever bit of hit, all to onst. I'm a-buyin hit this time jest to founder 'em."

Abe and Tommy were about halfway to the Station when they happened to look back and saw the twins tagging along at a discreet distance behind them.

"You'uns air a-gittin too dang big for yore breeches," Tommy called out indignantly. "Git!" When he threw a couple of small sticks at them to underscore his point, the twins sullenly turned back toward home.

In the store Frank Barnett was complaining, "Say, what would you do with a feller that tolls off yore hogs to his house an kills 'em for his winter's meat?"

"By God," said Old Man Brown, "I'd take my gun an go git back ever piece he put up. Air you shore somebody's doin' that?"

"Purty damn shore. Can't seem to ketch him at hit, but

I figger this feller's been a-winterin on my meat two-three years now."

"Whyn't you do like I said?" Old Man Brown urged.

"I dunno. He's got a passel of young'uns, an this feller's so doggone pore, them children air half-starved. Why, onst I was a-huntin over near there, an I seen their old hound dog a-comin home with a big bone. The dog was a-diggin a hole to bury hit when the feller seen the bone an called the young'uns. They all taken out after the dog; even the wife come an helped chase hit. One little boy got the bone outen the dog's mouth, an he hollered out they was a plenty of meat on hit. Then the wife grabbed hit an run back to the house. Said she'd cook hit with the beans."

The men sitting around the store all shook their heads in wonder.

"Another time I was a-huntin," Frank went on, "an I run into that same little boy in the woods. He looked kinda hongry. I had a passel of game, an somethin jest told me to give hit all to the young'un. Then he told me how the day before, him an the other young'uns an the hound chased a rabbit into a holler tree. They called their pa, an he come an axed the rabbit out. But when he skun hit, hits innards was fulla worms, an they jest hadda bury hit. I was glad I give the boy the game."

"That shore is a pore fam'ly," said John Gore. "Well, the Good Book says the pore will inherit the earth. Hope I kin hold out till then."

"I shore don't wanta be around when they do," Old Man Brown said testily. "Some of these shiftless varmints around here, iffen they air a-gonna take charge . . ."

"Hold on there," said Old Josh Hart. "You fellers don't know yore Bible. Hit says 'the meek shall inherit the earth.' A course, iffen you air pore, then you air meek. Maybe bein so damn meek is how come you air pore."

There was more talk back and forth, and Abe, who rarely had much to say, put his oar in. "They's a heck of a lotta pore people in the world. Looks like God has some use for 'em, even iffen Mr. Brown don't."

"You see?" said Old Josh. "Allus said Abe here was a smart boy for his age. He hain't never in a hurry to have his say, but when he gits hit out, hit makes good sense." He got to his feet now, shot a stream of brown juice at the ash box, and announced, "Reckon I'll sashay down to the saloon an see what's goin on."

Tommy nudged Abe, and the boys followed this example.

When they entered the saloon, several men asked after their pa's. Tommy mentioned the fact that his pa was off somewhere on a trade, and then told how his ma called his pa a trading fool.

"Well now," said Charley Harper, "I'm a man that likes to trade, myself. Ary person comes to my place, I'll likely trade 'em anything I got—that is, anything but my wife Bertha, an sometimes I'm durned iffen I wouldn't be glad of a chanst to trade her off."

Hez Evarts winked at the others and said, "Hear you made a deal with old John Gore for a hoss a little while back. How's that there hoss a-doin, Charley?"

Charley spluttered his drink and looked pained. "That's one my wife tells on me," he said mournfully.

"Hit's a humdinger, too," said Hez. "You tell us yore side of hit, Charley."

Charley needed no urging. "You fellers all know John Gore, lives over near Ravin Tad. One day he come a-ridin up to my place an says: 'Charley, I'm fixin to sell or swap this here hoss. You wanta trade?'"

"Well, I looked at the teeth an felt the legs an all. Hoss looked purty good. So I says I reckon we could make a deal.

"You got a plenty of corn?" says John.

"'Oh,' I says, carelesslike, 'I got sever'l hunnerd bushel.'

"'Then I'll take hit in corn,' he says. 'I'm short, an them hogs of mine, the less corn you got, the more they eat.'

"The very next day, on a Sunday even, he come with his wagon for the corn. Said he wouldn't be in sech a all-fired hurry, but he did need that corn real bad.

"Purty soon I found out how come all the hurry. First time I took that hoss out in the field to plow, he up an balked. Stubbornest critter God ever let live. I beat him till I damn near killed him; I done ever'thing else I could think of. He jest wouldn't budge.

"Bertha come out from the house an says, 'Charley, you know we didn't need that there hoss. Jest anything for a trade. Now yore corn's gone, an we'll likely run short; you hain't got near the corn you let on you had.' She says, 'Iffen you'd jest give yoreself more time on a trade. But you won't. I'll never forget the time you brung home them goats. Well, jest so hit hain't a dog next time. A hound'll eat more'n a hog, an hit hain't good for nothin exceptin to bark at night an wake me up.'

"Well sir, I went to work on that hoss agin, but I couldn't do a damn thing with him. I got so son-of-a-bitchin mad I couldn't see straight. Couldn't even eat my dinner that day, an when I miss eatin, that's when you know they's somethin wrong. I says to my wife, 'Bertha, you listen to what I'm a-tellin you.' I says, 'I'll git even with that John Gore iffen hit's the last thing I do. So help me.'"

Charley paused dramatically, using the time to have another drink.

"He loves to tell a story," Tommy whispered to Abe, "even when hit's on him."

"You see how hit is," Charley went on. "Anytime I'd go in the store, ever time I come in here for a little nip to cheer me up, the fellers'd poke each other an grin, an some var-

mint would say like Hez jest done, 'Charley, I hear you boughten a hoss offen John Gore.' I'd say, 'Yep, a hell of a fine hoss,' but I'd be like to bust.

"I useta lay awake nights, tryin to figger a way to skin old John as bad as he skun me. I'd lay there a-tossin and a-rollin, an come mornin, I couldn't hardly eat. Bertha, she calls me Old Six Biscuits, cause when I'm my natchel self, anytime she'll make biscuits, I'll eat six, no more, no less. But they come times now I couldn't eat but two or three. What with no food an no rest an bein mad all the time, I was a-gittin pale an puny."

Everyone laughed heartily, for Charley packed plenty of weight on his six-foot frame and looked anything but puny, and he was one of these incurably good-natured men.

"Well, one mornin Bertha come in the house an says, 'That there spotted cow is a-sullin an won't give down her milk.' I says, 'Leave her alone awhile an she'll git over hit.' Come evenin, though, the dang cow was still a-sullin. I says to Bertha, 'Lemme milk her for you. I'll learn her.' But hit seemed like the dang brute had got the very devil in her. She was actin muley an her eyes looked wild, an she still wouldn't let no milk down. 'Bossy,' I says, 'you air a-workin up to a bad end.'

"That night I woke Bertha up in the middle of the night. She'd been a-sleepin real good an she was mad about hit, till I told her, 'I jest got a idee. Come mornin, I'm a-ridin over to John Gore's to see kin I sell him the damn cow. That'll make them fellers in town shut their mouth.'

"Next day I got up bright an early an et hearty. I was feelin good now, an I teased Bertha some. You know, the wife is still a right good-lookin woman, spite of all the hard work, but since we got married she's put on maybe fifty pounds. I says, 'Honey, iffen you git any fatter, I hain't a-gonna ride to church with you no more on Sunday. They

hain't room enough on the wagon seat for both our rumps right now, an I'll be dogged iffen I'll ride a-settin on the dashboard jest cause you won't let up on the biscuits.' She got real mad and says, 'You got no room to talk, Charley Harper. I hain't never gonna make you no more biscuits as long as you live.'

"I rode off to Gore's, an on the way I was a-thinkin, 'John, you better eat hearty this mornin while you kin, cause startin tomorrer, hit's you that'll be a-worryin, figgerin how to git even with me.'

"When I got to the house an hollered, old John come out a-grinnin like a fool an says, 'Well, iffen hit hain't Charley Harper.' He showed me his bitch that jest had pups, ten of 'em. 'That there is the best huntin dog in the county,' he says, 'an she allus throws good pups. I'm a-gonna trade 'em all an have me a real good pack of hounds.'

"I played with the pups awhile, an then I says careless-like, 'You know, John, I been a-thinkin I got more cows than I need. Aim to trade a couple of 'em off.' He says, 'Well now, I could use a good milker.' So we talked awhile an finely made a deal—my spotted cow for two of them pups. I said I'd bring the cow over first thing in the mornin.

"When I got home, the wife hugged me an says, 'I knowed you'd make the deal.' An I says, 'Honey, I allus knowed you was a angel,' cause lo an behold, she had a big chunk of ham an a batch of hot biscuits a-waitin for me.

"That night I had a terrible dream. Seemed like a big black cloud come up an sorta hung over my place. Then hit reached down an scooped up the spotted cow, *swish*, an carried her off through the air. Dogies iffen I could figger what that dream meant.

"Come mornin, the cow still wouldn't give down, but I says, 'That's fine; makes her bag look plump, like a real good milker. Let old John git that milk tonight.' Me an Bertha

laughed; we could jest see him a-tryin. Bertha wanted to come along, so we hurried up the chores an started off in the wagon, with the old cow tied behind.

"‘Bertha,’ I says, ‘gittin skinned like I did with that hoss has plumb cured me. This here is my last trade. Soon’s I’m even with old John, I’m through.’ But she jest laughed an says, ‘Hit’s in yore blood, Charley. The day you quit tradin, that’s when the lid on yore coffin’ll be done nailed down so tight you can’t git out.’

"First mile or so, old Bossy was jest skippin along, an ever’thing went fine. But after a while she began to pull back. I slowed down, but that jest made her worsen. Yep, I told you that dang brute had the devil in her."

Charley sighed deeply and fell silent. "Here," said Jim Ashly, "you better have another drink."

Charley exhaled in a long "ah" as the drink went down, then sort of pulled himself together and went on with the story.

"Well, Bertha got down an walked along a-holdin a ear of corn jest ahead of Bossy’s nose. For a while hit looked like that would do the trick. But all of a sudden the brute quit tryin to use her legs an jest set down in the road.

"Boys, reckon I don’t hafta tell you, that made me mad for shore. Bertha says the back of my neck got red as far. ‘I can’t close no deal lessen we kin git her there,’ I says. ‘But she’ll git there,’ I says, ‘iffen I hafta drag her all the way.’

"I started up the oxens, but Bertha hollers, ‘Look out, Charley. You air li’ble to pull her head clean off.’ So I told the wife to drive, an I got down. I clumb the fence into the field an pulled up a bunch of dry grass, an then I held hit under the brute’s nose an set the stuff on far. By God, she jest turned her head away. Then I got me some more grass an lit hit under her tail. That did hit, glory be. She got up an we got started agin.

"‘Jest one more hill,’ I says, ‘an we’ll have her in John

Gore's barn lot an be shet of her.' I was feelin good agin, but the wife was worried. 'I got a funny feelin,' she says. 'Bossy's eyes don't suit me; they look kinda buggy.'

"Shore enough, when we was halfway up that last hill, old Bossy up an lays down in the road. I got down an lit some more grass under her tail, an that got her up. But this time the son-of-a-bitch jest swung her rump outen the way an laid right down again. Hit looked like the jig was up.

"Lemme try her,' says Bertha. 'Maybe what she needs is jest a little kindness.' So Bertha comes an holds up a ear a corn, an then some fodder that I pulled up in the field. 'Sook, sook,' she says. 'Nice Bossy, good Bossy.' She patted the dang brute on the back an talked real nice to her. 'Sook, sook.' Then Bertha says to me, 'She's a-gittin a kinda friendly look in the eye now. I do believe I'm a-gonna toll her up.' An I says, 'By God, I got ten dollars for you iffen you do.'

"You hear that, Bossy?' says the wife. 'Why, ten dollars'll git me a new dress an a pair of shoes, an Lord knows what all for the house, besides. You wouldn't do me outen ten dollars, would you now? Nice gal, nice Bossy, sook, sook.'

"Seemed like a year went by, with Bertha a-pettin an a-coaxin. I set up on the wagon, a-cussin to myself. Finely I jest couldn't stand hit no longer. 'Git up on the wagon,' I says to Bertha. I tell you, this time I had far in my eye. I got down an went over the fence an pulled off the top rail.

"When I turned back toward the wagon, Bertha was a-settin there with her eyes squoze shut an her fingers in her ears, an she was a-prayin. I shut my eyes, too, an heisted up that rail, an brung her down.

"Now look what you done,' the wife hollers, an she bust out a-cryin. 'Charley, I do believe you air crazier than the cow. Now I don't git no shoes an you don't make no trade.' I looked an seen I'd done busted a horn clean off. A course, iffen John Gore seen that horn, he'd smell a rat right off.

"So they was nothin to do but turn around an head back home. You know, hit took us till near dark to git that son-of-a-bitchin cow back where she started from. An two-three days later, she jest up an died. John Gore never knowed how close he come to gittin paid back for the hoss deal."

"I hear old John knows all about how you tried to git even," said Hez. "Betcha he's a-laughin up his sleeve right now."

Charley banged his big fist down on the bar. "By God, I hain't through with him yet! One of these days I'm a-gonna skin him so bad he won't think they's nothin funny."

Several of the fellows gathered around and slapped Charley on the back and told him, "There now, no call to take hit so hard. Here, have a drink."

Charley drank up, then turned around to show his old good-natured grin. He jumped up in the air and popped his heels together and hollered out, "My mammy fit my daddy, my daddy fit my mammy, an like a fool, I picked up a stool an knocked down pore old Granny!"

OLD JOSH SPOKE UP. "MY wife tells one on me I'll never hear the last of."

"Let's hear it," several of the fellows urged.

Old Josh pointedly said nothing. He took out a big twist of tobacco, carefully inspected it from all angles, and bit off a chew.

"Gimme a chew, will you, Josh?" Rube Grigsby asked. "I got none left."

Going the rounds of all the men who had no tobacco of their own, the twist dwindled rapidly. Old Josh looked with disgust at the mere stub which was returned to him. "You'uns might jest as well have took the whole damn twist."

"Come on, Josh, give us the story."

The old fellow scowled, keeping his lips pressed tight together, until at last the fellows took the hint and primed him with a couple of drinks.

"Well, when me an my old woman was jest married, we lived out on the Dewberry Road. This happened about the time our first young'un was three-four months old. One evenin I took a look at the sky an seen a big black cloud

a-rollin up from the southwest. It kep' a-gittin blacker an blacker, an then the air got kinda greenish.

"Now, I don't mind tellin you'uns, they's three things in this world I'm afeard of: my wife, a strange bull, an a real bad storm. I kep' a-watchin that there cloud, an purty soon I says to the old woman, 'Nervy, hit looks like a cyclone a-comin up, for shore.' Will Cisney had a cellar dug for taters, so I says, 'We better git over to Will's place.'

"Nervy didn't wanta go, said I was a fool. Then hit got dark all of a sudden, an purty soon the wind come up. Hit was a-howlin like a wolf. I was so skeered then I jest couldn't stand hit no longer, so I says to my old woman, 'You bring a light,' an I grabbed the young'un an lit out a-runnin. So Nervy grabbed a lamp, one of them little kind you hang on the wall, an come a-runnin after me; she says they warn't nothin else to do.

"'Shortest way's through the woods,' she hollers, an I holler back, 'Pray God we make hit.' We hadda lean agin the wind. Now the rain was a-comin down so hard that by the time a person had took three-four steps, he felt like he was drowned. In the woods the trees was a-groanin like a old man with the mis'ry, an ever now an then some old dead limb would come a-whackin down. Hit thundered an hit lightnin'd like all hell bust loose.

"All of a sudden hit come to me that they was bulls in them woods. In them days ever'body let all their stock run loose. Will Cisney had a couple bulls, an I knowed I'd seen one of 'em in them woods the day before. What with the storm, them bulls would be in a mean mood.

"Warn't nothin to do but keep a-runnin. How Nervy ever kep' up with me I don't know, cause by that time I was so skeered I was plumb flyin. Then right alongside me, I heard some critter a-comin through the bresh. I jest knowed hit was one of them bulls.

"Well, Nervy tells this on me, an I don't dispute her word, cause I know I was plumb beside myself. I turned around an handed her the baby, an quick as a squir'l, I skun up the nearest tree. There was Nervy down on the ground, a-holdin the lamp an the young'un besides, an there was me up the tree.

"Purty soon she says, 'Josh, you dang fool, come down here an git a holt of this here lamp afore I drop an break hit. That critter hain't no bull; hit's yore own old cow. An this here hain't no cyclone; hit's a plain rainstorm that'll do the crops a world of good. Now come on home.'

"So I clumb down an follered her an the baby home. Hain't no use in me not tellin about hit, cause to this day Nervy tells hit on me ever chanst she gits."

After that, several men told about times when they had been scared, and Abe and Tommy told about going hunting and getting lost. Between them they made a pretty good story of it. They were just about to leave then, when Rube Grigsby stopped them and held out a pint he'd just bought to take home with him.

"Here, you young fellers, have a little nip afore you go."

Though the offer made the boys feel grown up indeed, Tommy wisely declined for both of them. "Thanks, but iffen my ma smelled it on us an told my pa, hit wouldn't be healthy for me."

As they were approaching the house, the boys saw Sarah out in the yard hanging freshly washed diapers on the bushes.

"Look at all them hippens," Abe remarked.

"That Lyddy is the wettest baby in the world," said Tommy. "You can't never take her up withouten you git wet, too. Hit'll shore be a blessin when she gits old enough to go out in the woods like the rest of us."

Melinda called out to ask the boys to keep an eye on Eunie and the twins.

"One of Penny's pups died," Sarah explained, "an Penny picked hit up in her mouth an went off into the woods. The young'uns air a-follerin her."

Tommy and Abe soon located the children, who were hiding behind a tree, watching the dog. The big boys kept their distance, hiding behind trees too. They watched while the dog dug a hole and buried the pup, and then while the young ones held a solemn funeral service over the spot. Later Eunie, meeting Tommy and Abe at the edge of the woods, told them all about it.

"We put flowers on the little puppy's grave, at the head an at the foot. An we all said a prayer."

"Well now, that was right nice of you'uns," Abe told her, and Tommy remarked, "Dogs has got more sense than some humans, I reckon."

That evening, after the chores were done and supper eaten, the boys hung around the coons' empty cage awhile, but saw no sign of the animals. Along toward dawn, when the boys were lying side by side in the loft, both woke up at the same moment and propped themselves on their elbows. The sounds from the woods told them that the dogs had something treed.

"Wonder iffen that's them," Tommy whispered. He remembered that he hadn't worried like this when his squirrel Hickory had run off. "Didn't know enough," he thought to himself, "though I'd shot a plenty of squir'ls." Now he knew that he'd never be able to kill a coon without feeling queer about it, and that probably he'd never know what became of his pets.

"No use to take on about hit," he told himself, settling down again, and Abe, sensing the drift of Tommy's thoughts, settled down too, without saying anything.

Tommy lay awake awhile, thinking deep thoughts. "This here is a hard world," he decided. Abe, he realized, had known this for some time. Maybe understanding such things

was a surer sign of being grown up than was even the offer of a drink in the saloon.

Next morning the boys went hunting and got a good batch of game for the pot. Tommy suggested going home by way of Loafer Station, just for the heck of it. When they got to the crossroads, they saw a bunch of women gathered on the porch of the store, and yet to the boys the town seemed deserted. Not a soul was in sight anywhere around the blacksmith shop, and the saloon, too, was empty.

At the store Martha Brown explained, "Ever man an boy in town has went to help put out the far. Look down the road, an you kin see the smoke from jest t'other side of the hill. Must be the Skelton sisters' place."

Abe and Tommy promptly lit out down the road and soon reached the scene of the fire, but they were too late to be of much help. Not that anyone had been able to do much. The men and boys from town had saved the shed by passing buckets of water from the spring to wet it down, and those who had arrived first had got a couple of pieces of furniture out of the cabin; but the cabin itself had been past saving, and now was no more than a bed of embers. Melisha and Verda Skelton, the two elderly sisters who had lived there, were standing in the yard, crying. Melisha was pouring out a bitter tale.

"Verda allus was keerless how she handled far. Last winter we had a lotta pickles an preserves put up, an stored 'em up in the loft. We put some old quilts over 'em. Come that real cold spell, Verda, she hadda light a lantern an put hit under the quilts to keep the stuff from freezin. I told her then, someday she'd burn the house down, but she was hard-headed."

"I know I done wrong," Verda wailed.

"Then this mornin," Melisha went on, "nothin would do her but to go up in the loft for somethin afore hit was light

enough to see. So she taken a candle, an hit fell outen her hand, an now our house an our clo'es an ever'thing's done gone."

Someone had ridden off to fetch a brother of the two ladies, and about this time he arrived to take them home with him. Abe and Tommy felt mighty sorry for both the sisters, but mostly for Miss Verda, who looked sick. While people were telling her brother the details of the fire, she just went and crawled up on the wagon seat without saying a word.

For several hours Tommy and Abe and most of the others hung around watching for stray sparks and beating them out. Everyone wanted to string out the excitement as long as possible. But eventually the boys realized that it was getting late and that they had better get on home.

They found Tommy's ma and Sarah in the yard, hanging out wash again. While the boys were telling about the fire, they heard weird sounds coming from the cabin.

"Yore pa brung home a fiddle this time," Melinda explained. "He's in there now a-playin hit, or anyways a-tryin to."

Isaac appeared in the doorway and called howdy to Abe, then asked, "Has the hogs come in yet?"

"Looks like Pa stopped somewheres on the way home an had a few snorts," Tommy told Abe. "When Pa's liquored up, you don't wanta fool with him; he's li'ble to knock yore head off."

Melinda and Sarah went inside to start supper, and the boys followed, carrying wood. Then the twins came galloping in, each yelling, "Ma, I'm starved!"

"You little devils, where you been?" Isaac asked.

"We was chasin wild turkeys, Pa."

"I don't know what I'm gonna do with you two. Always into some meanness. And another thing: somebody told they

seen you'uns over to Loafer Station. Better not let me catch you twins a-goin over there unbeknownst to me. Iffen I do, I'll whop the breeches offen you, you hear me? Some of them low-down rascals over there, iffen Sarah warn't a-settin here, I'd say what I think of 'em."

Isaac's attention turned to Tommy now. "You an Joe finish that fence yet, like I told you?"

Melinda felt it wise to change the subject at this point. "Isaac, you shouldn't ought of stayed away overnight this time, when they's so much work to do around the place."

"Work?" said Isaac. "What the hell you think I'm a-raisin all these boys for? To set on their rumps all day?" He tucked the fiddle under his chin again and gave them all a good-humored grin. "I'm the one that's gonna do that, an my boys better not forgit it."

Tommy and Abe slipped outside immediately, while the going was good; but once out of his father's hearing, Tommy said in a defiant tone, "One of these days I'm gonna up an git married. Then I won't hafta take no more of Pa's bossin, nor Ma's, neither." Now he put on an air of great worldly wisdom. "Say, Abe, wouldn't hit be nice to have a woman to git yore bed warm ever night?"

Abe had a droll way of saying things whenever something tickled him. "You know what comes of that. How you figger to make a livin for all them cryin babies?"

Tommy whooped with laughter. "Well, I couldn't make out no worse than that feller that stole the dog's bone, could I? I aim to git me a passel of dogs, so they'll bring home a plenty of bones."

A COUPLE OF YEARS WENT by, and Tommy and Abe were both at the age to begin taking an interest in girls. Tommy liked Abe's sister Sarah, while Abe was mildly smitten with Polly, one of the Tooley girls. The four young people would often get together and walk or ride over to Gentryville to do Sally Lincoln's trading. Sally would have them get salt and soda and usually a few pounds of green coffee, which it would be Sarah's job to grind after her step-mother had parched it. Sometimes on these trips the young people would have quite a load to carry back, but they didn't mind, for they always had fun.

Tommy, of course, was not the only boy who liked Sarah. Henry Lemare was dropping in at the Lincoln place pretty often, until Tom Lincoln said, "I don't wanta see that young numbskull around here no more, you hear me? That boy hain't got sense enough to pour water outen a boot."

Aaron Grigsby was another who took a shine to Sarah, and Abe saw right away that Sarah liked Aaron better than she did Tommy. Abe was worried for his friend's sake. But when Tommy found out that somebody was beating his time,

he didn't seem the least bit broken-hearted. He already had a new interest.

"You should see her, Abe," he caroled. "She's got big blue eyes—dark blue—an brown curls fallin over her shoulders. Purty as a rosel"

"Who's this?"

"Her name's Betty Ingram."

"Don't reckon I know her."

"Her folks live over northeast of Loafer Station. She comes to the Station sometimes on a Sat'day. I hain't had no chanst to talk to her yet, cause her ma is allus with her, an her little brother, besides. Her ma keeps a sharp eye on her, dog take hit."

"An no wonder," said Abe. 'Ever'body knows Loafer Station hain't no place for a gal to go alone, what with all them drunks a-hangin 'round the saloon. Why, onst I hadda beat the hind sights offen one of them fellers for the way he was eyin Sarah."

"Well, I hain't no drunk. I gotta find a way to git acquainted with that gal. From now on I'm gonna be at the Station ever Sat'day."

Tommy did find a way before long. The next time the Ingrams came to Brown's store, Tommy, of course, was hanging around. Betty and her ma went inside the store, leaving Betty's little brother outside on the porch. It was easy for Tommy to get acquainted with the little boy, whose name was Sammy; and for a gift of a couple of marbles, Sammy was glad to go inside and give his sister a message.

"Jest tell her, 'Yore hoss is a-tryin to git loose.'"

Betty came out to the hitching rack right away. She saw that the horse was all right, and then, of course, she knew that the summons had really come from that young fellow who was hanging around. She pretended to tie the horse better.

"Lemme do that for you," Tommy said, and then, in an undertone, "I been wantin to talk to you."

Betty blushed and looked down at her toes.

Unlike many boys his age, Tommy was not the least bit shy. Bold as brass, he said right off, "The Clarks air havin a apple-cuttin bee this Wednesday. Three fiddlers will be there to play for the dancin after we git the apples done. Would you go with me?"

"I'd admire to, but I'll hafta ast Ma."

Her ma came out just about then to see what was going on. She was a stout, good-natured woman. When Betty asked her about the apple-cutting, Mrs. Ingram sized Tommy up and said, "Well, young man, I've met yore pa and ma at the Little Zion Church here, an besides bein Baptists, they air well thought of, I know." With a fond look at Betty, she added, "I can't hardly believe she hain't still a baby, but I reckon it's time she started goin with somebody. Iffen she don't, she might be a old maid, an land's sakes, anything but that!"

Betty blushed again and Tommy laughed politely.

"Then she kin go?"

"Iffen the weather is fittin."

On Wednesday evening, when Tommy called for Betty, she turned around before him to show off her new dress. It was a yellow one, laced up the front with black ribbon.

"Ma made it special for the party," she confided. "She sold every egg on the place, and some of her layin hens besides, to buy the goods."

Mrs. Ingram wiped her hands on her apron before giving the dress a final pat here and there to smooth it. A tear slid down her fat cheek as she said proudly, "You'll shore ketch all their eyes tonight, honey."

Betty did indeed attract everyone's eyes—especially Abe Lincoln's. She and Tommy arrived at the Clarks' a little late;

all the other guests were already busy slicing apples for drying. Dolly Clark gave the newcomers sharp knives and ran to get Betty an apron to protect her pretty dress. While they worked, the young people were all cracking jokes and laughing—all but Abe. He was struck speechless by Betty's beauty. He forgot all about Polly Tooley, and simply stared at Betty.

Everyone was impatient for the dancing, and pretty soon Aaron Grigsby began to sneak every third or fourth apple in his basket into an empty barrel. When the others noticed, they all started doing it.

"My, you young'uns air fast workers," Dolly's ma remarked.

In no time the apples had all disappeared. Then the furniture was cleared out of the way and the fiddlers began tuning up. While Tommy was outside answering the call of nature, Abe asked Betty to dance with him. When Tommy came back, the caller was singing out, "Dosey-doe," and there was Abe prancing around with Betty in his arms.

Tommy got hot all over. Though he was red in the face, he managed to seem nonchalant as he sauntered over to Polly and asked her to be his partner. He figured that if he danced with Abe's girl, that might show old Abe a thing or two.

Abe, dancing with Betty, would have been the happiest boy in the world if he hadn't felt like such a fool for being tongue-tied. He wanted to tell her how pretty she was, wanted to tell her a lot of things, but he couldn't get a word out.

On the way home, after he had left Polly at her door, he reasoned with himself.

"Hit beats all about me. Here I hafta go an fall in love with Tommy's gal. Iffen I could beat his time with Betty, I hadn't oughta do it. A course, he's li'ble to see some other gal next week that he'll like better'n her; he's that kinda feller. Still, I hadn't oughta do hit.

"Not that I got much chanst. The way she looks at him, she's Tommy's gal, all right. Can't blame her iffen she likes him better'n me, that's ugly as a mud fence." Abe knew perfectly well that with his long, gangling frame, his rough-hewn face, and his unruly hair, he'd never be much for looks. "Gals like a good-lookin feller. Ma usta say purty is as purty does, but I reckon the gals don't figger thataway."

He was still arguing with himself when he turned his horse loose in the pasture. He whistled as he walked toward the house, so that the folks would know who it was.

Sally called out to ask if he'd had a good time and to say good-night, and Pa grumbled sleepily, "Folks that git to bed at a decent time don't git up tarred in the mornin when they's work to be done."

Abe climbed the row of pegs in the cabin wall up to the loft. He said his prayers as usual, and as he pulled up the quilts, he added a special plea to God. "Please, Lord, make Betty fall in love with me, an let Tommy not mind."

For a long time he lay awake thinking of her. By jacks, she was probably the most beautiful female in the whole world. At last he realized that he'd better get some sleep.

"Pa'll wear me out iffen I don't git up at sunup when he calls me. Like as not Miz Lincoln'll want me to shoot some squir'ls for breakfast."

He wrapped his arms around his pillow, pretending it was Betty, and fell asleep dreaming of her.

Tommy, at that moment, was punching his pillow with a hard fist. He had begun the quarrel with Betty right after the party, while she had been riding behind him on the mare, with her arms around his middle and her long skirt floating in the breeze.

"Iffen you wanta be my gal," he had told her, "then by God, be my gal. Don't go a-flirtin with ever other boy you see."

"I warn't a-flirtin with nobody," she had protested, "jest

bein friendly, that's all. Iffen you think for one minute, Tommy Garrison, that I'm gonna turn up my nose at ever'-body but you an never have no friends, you kin think agin."

There had been a lot more talk back and forth, until, in her dooryard, she had told him, "Well, iffen that's the way you feel, you don't hafta come around here no more."

"I'm leavin," he had answered huffily. And then, "Reckon I'll go back to Ohio, where my folks come from."

He had expected that to scare her. She should have begged him not to leave the neighborhood, and then maybe have asked him to sit on the porch awhile. Instead she had said not a word, just flounced into the house and left him standing there.

Tommy never mentioned the quarrel to Abe. In a week Tommy and Betty made up, anyway, and started going together again. Abe decided that there was no chance for him and tried to put Betty out of his mind.

AS OFTEN AS THEY GOT THE
chance, the boys would ride over to Loafer Station nowadays; and if neither of their pa's was there, they'd sidle into the saloon and just stand around. Sally knew that was exactly what the boys would do, and she didn't much like their going to the Station.

"Lord knows what kinda talk you air li'ble to hear in that there saloon," she complained.

"Well, I don't believe all I hear," Abe reassured her. "Hit won't hurt me none just to stand around there."

The talk that went on in the saloon was always interesting. Sometimes Old Wiley Willis was there, still mourning his dead mother and mumbling about the old settlers who had gone before, "separatin an rejoinin, rushin outa mem'ry like the waters of a river." Usually Charley Harper was around, always full of tomfoolery. Between drinks he'd cut a caper and shout out his everlasting "My mammy fit my daddy, my daddy fit my mammy, an like a fool I picked up a stool an knocked down pore old Granny!"

Once Jim Ashly, the bartender, urged him, "Charley, give us some of that lost language."

"What's the lost language, Charley?" Tommy asked. Only a little while ago he would have said "Mr. Harper," for Tommy's ma had taught him manners, but he had decided that he was a man now and didn't need to go around mistering people any more.

"That's the old Injun language. Warn't so long ago the Injuns was here. My daddy fit em. You might even find a few Injuns around here yet, iffen you looked good enough. But their language is plumb lost and forgotten. I still remember some of it, though, that I once learned from my great-gran-pappy."

"Come on, Charley," Jess Hoskins put in, "let's hear some of that Injun talk."

"All right, then. I'll tell you how the Injuns useta count. Stand back from the bar, ever'body, an gimme yore attention. No, wait a minute. First I better have another drink. Iffen I'm too damn sober, I'm li'ble to forgit."

"Here's yore drink," said Jim. "You all primed now?"

"Now I gotta spit out my tobaccer. Where's the dang ash box? Is a feller supposed to spit on the floor around here, Jim?"

Someone pointed out that Charley was looking for the ash box on the wrong side of the stove; the box was around on the other side, where it had always been.

"This Injun talk," Charley explained to the boys, "you gotta say hit fast. You roll hit around in yore mouth awhile, then spit hit out quick."

"Hurry up, Charley," said Jess. "I gotta git home an chop some wood for my old woman."

"Jest one more little, weeny drink first, to gimme the spark. All right, stand back, fellers, here I go. *Teen tane, tether feather, hemp skip, scather rather, teen dick, tane*

dick, feather dick, tether dick, tean bumpy, tane bumpy, tether bumpy, feather bumpy, jinks!"

"What kinda crazy talk you call that?" said Jess.

"I told you a while ago, that's Injun countin. Iffen you fellers warn't so all-fired ignor'nt, you'd know that. Reckon either one of you boys could learn to count like that an say hit fast?"

"I'll stick to the reg'lar way of countin," said Tommy.

One time in the saloon Abe nearly got into a fight. The men were talking about the new church that had been built over at Little Pigeon, near the Lincoln place. Its regular name was the Baptist Church of Jesus Christ, but everybody called it Little Pigeon Church. The Lincolns were members.

"Hit was about time the Little Pigeon congregation got around to buildin," said Sam Ritter. "They'd been meetin in members' houses. A course, hit costs a sight of money to build a church."

"Shore does," Jim agreed. "They decided that ever member would give whatever he could, in cash or kind. I hear Rube Grigsby give four hunderd dollars."

"That's a fack, but I heard Tom Lincoln only give twenty-four pounds of corn. You'd think the old skinflint could spare more'n that."

Abe flared up. "How do you know how much my pa could spare? Anyways, you heard wrong."

"Don't reckon the feller that told me woulda made no mistake about a thing like that," Sam insisted.

"Well, either he made a mistake or he was just plain lyin." If ever in his life there was a time when Abe wanted to cuss, it was now. He knew, though, that cussing wasn't going to make Sam believe him, and so he held himself in. "You jest wait right here, Sam, an I'll show you in black an white."

He tore out of the door and headed for home so fast that Tommy had a heck of a time catching up with him. When Abe burst through the door at home, Sally took one look at him and dropped the skillet.

"Abe, what's happened? What for air you so white in the face?"

"They're tellin over at Loafer Station that Pa didn't give much on the new church."

"Lawsy me, don't tell yore pa about it. He'd shore git mad, an trouble might come of hit."

"I got to prove hit's a lie. Miz Lincoln, where at is that paper you an my pa was a-studyin one night?"

Sally reached under the bed for the box where she kept her quilt patterns, and took out a paper. "Take good keer of hit, Abe, an be shore you bring hit home."

The boys rode back to the Station lickety-split. Sam and a few other loafers were still hanging around. In the saloon Abe spread his paper on the bar.

"This'll show you. These here are all the subscribers' names an what they give." He read aloud: "Moses Lemare, pork, a hunnerd an fifty pounds; Nod Jordan, two hunnerd dollars; Reuben Grigsby, four hunnerd dollars; Bertha Bora, a brute, ten dollars; Robert Hoskins, corn, twenty bushel; Jess Hoskins, a cow brute; Charley Harper, corn, twenty bushel; Joseph Willem, pork, a hunnerd pounds . . ."

Sam, reading over Abe's shoulder, interrupted. "Look here," he said, running a finger down the page. "Thomas Lincoln, corn, twenty-four pounds."

"Shore, but that don't take in all the work he did an work counted, too. See, hit says, 'William Smith, work, three hunnerd dollars.' An here's 'John Gore, work, five days.' You know my pa's a carpenter. Many's the day he spent on the church when he coulda been workin on his own place."

"Hit don't say nothin about that here," said Sam.

Abe was dumfounded. "Somebody forgot to put hit down."

Sam looked dubious, and Abe's hands closed into fists. But then Sam said, "All right, son, I kin tell you air a-tellin the truth, an I reckon yore pa's no skinflint. Hope they's no hard feelins."

It took Abe a little time to cool down, but at last he relaxed his hands. "All right, no hard feelins."

"Thought they was goin to be a fight," said Jim Ashly. "For a minute there, things looked mighty juberous." Jim seemed disappointed. In an aside to some of the men, he added, "Hit would of been a good fight. That Abe is jest a young pup, but he's strong as a bull."

Another time the talk got around to the Widow Smith. The boys knew that the women in the neighborhood didn't like her; they said she had too many men callers. It was plain, though, that the menfolks liked her fine. They all agreed she was not bad looking at all.

"Nice disposition, too," Jess Hoskins remarked. "Allus got a friendly word for ever'body."

"Yep, she's shore friendly," Sam Ritter said, and everybody laughed.

Baldy Bill Jones started poking fun at Nod Watson. "On my way to town today I seen Nod here a-cuttin through the daisy field like he'd jest come from the Widder's. Expected when I got here to see him lookin happy, but instead he's real down in spirits. Must of found somebody else there ahead of you, eh, Nod?"

Everybody laughed again. Baldy Bill winked at the fellows and went on, "You a married man, Nod, with eight young'uns, an here you air a-runnin to the Widder's. Hit shore beats all."

The men guffawed. Nod looked glum and said nothing, just downed his drink and walked out.

"I feel sorry for old Nod," said Jess. "That wife of his is a real nagger. Reckon he jest hasta git away sometimes. A feller hasta have some fun onst in a while to keep on livin'."

The boys had been taking everything in, and Tommy was looking mighty wise.

"Look at them boys with their ears a-standin up jest like a mule's," said Old Josh Hart.

Baldy Bill took notice of the boys for the first time. "When did you young'uns sneak in here? This hain't no place for you'uns. Better run along home now an let yore ma's wipe the snot offen yore faces."

Tommy was fit to be tied. "Who you callin a snotnose, Baldy Bill? An what call you got to poke fun at Nod Watson? Hain't you a married man? You got nine childern, more'n he's got, an don't tell me you never been to see the Widder, cause I was hidin behind her house one day last week an seen you a-comin out the door."

The laugh was on Baldy Bill then. Charley Harper added to the fun by saying, "Bill here prob'ly knows ever widder in the state of Indiana. That's why he's a-gittin old afore his time."

"I don't need nobody to tell me my business," said Baldy Bill. "What does the Good Book say about green pastures? A man gits a hankerin for greener pastures ever now an then."

"Yep," Old Josh agreed, "that's human nature."

On their way home that day, out of curiosity the boys cut through the daisy field to take the trail that led past the Widder's cabin. And what did they see but Old Josh Hart coming down the lane.

"He's steppin mighty spry for a feller that's near eighty year old, hain't he?" Tommy commented.

"Shore is," Abe agreed. "Looks like a sack of taters he's carryin."

The boys hunkered down behind some bushes to watch Old Josh. They saw him go in the Widow's house. It was quite a while later when he came out, with no sack. Just to see what he'd have to say, the boys stepped out of the bushes into the lane and said, "Howdy."

When he spied them, the old man got so mad, the rest of his face turned as red as his nose. The red went well with his white hair and whiskers.

"What in hell air you young'uns a-doin over thisaway?" he demanded to know. "You'uns hain't hardly got yore hippens off. Both of you boys air too young yet to be even thinkin about widders."

Tommy grinned impudently. "Iffen we air too young, Josh, hain't you a mite too old?"

Old Josh forgot to be mad then, and with a twinkle in his eye he told them, "Jest 'cause they's snow on the roof, you don't need to think the far's out in the stove. Now git for home, you two, or I'll tell yore pa's on you."

The threat made the boys mad. "I dast you to tell my pa," said Tommy. "You do, an shore as shootin I'll tell yore old woman where you been today."

Old Josh cackled. "I know when I'm whopped. Nervy would skin me alive."

When he left them, the boys hit the trail for home. It led them past a deserted cabin where a childless old couple had once lived. Now the doorsill was rotted half away and the pole-and-puncheon roof had fallen in. Spotted yellow leaves, twitched from the trees by the autumn wind, fluttered down through the air and whispered on the ground. The cabin put Abe in mind of Old Wiley Willis' old settlers, and the leaves and dry grass moving under the wind were like the rushing waters of a river.

A path bordered with dog fennel branched off from the lane to ramble through an old orchard. This was where

young couples liked to come to watch the moon rise—and sometimes to watch it set.

“Say, Abe,” said Tommy, “let’s git some gals an come here to gather nuts. These here walnut trees air jest loaded, an they’s lots of hickory nuts, too, iffen we beat the squir’ls to ’em.”

Abe liked the idea. “Let’s ast Betty an Polly when they kin come.”

“Naw, not Betty.”

Abe was amazed. “Don’t you like Betty no more? She’s sech a nice gal.”

“That’s the trouble—she’s too damn nice.”

Abe caught on. “So you think you air man enough for that, eh?”

“Shore I am. Shucks, I been to see the Widder.” Suddenly something occurred to him. “I took notice that Old Josh had a sack when he went in, an come out withouten hit. Iffen that’s what’s a-goin on, I better take some victuals with me when I go agin.”

“Reckon you air more of a man than me,” Abe said without envy.

“You air kinda backwards, Abe. Whyn’t you come along with me next time?”

“Naw, I’ll hold my far till I git older an git married.”

“You hain’t a-livin yet. Yep, the Widder hain’t bad. Thing I like best about her, though, is her daughter Martha. She’s got blond hair an big blue eyes and purty red lips. I can’t do no lovin with her; she’s too young, don’t know life yet. But I like her right smart.”

Abe could hardly believe his ears. “I been thinkin what a lucky feller you air to be goin with a gal like Betty, an here you wanta take up with some other gal. A-runnin to the Widder, besides! How kin you do Betty thataway?”

“How come you worry so much about Betty? I allus

thought hit was Polly Tooley you had on yore mind." Tommy thought a minute. "So that's the way the wind's a-blowin. Well, iffen you wanta go see Betty, Abe, go ahead. I don't keer."

Hope leaped in Abe's heart, but then it died away. He didn't believe Tommy really meant that. Abe had a notion that Tommy thought a lot more of Betty than he let on, even to himself.

*W*HAT WITH ALL THE plowing and planting, a considerable time went by before Abe could take a day off to hang around Loafer Station in the hope of seeing Betty. But at last came a Saturday when he was free to go. He had Sarah cut his hair like Pa's, then borrowed her scissors and made a big to-do of trimming the fuzz on his upper lip and chin. He slicked down his unruly hair with bear grease and put on a clean shirt.

He was leaning on the counter in Brown's store when Betty and her ma came in. Immediately Abe straightened up, his eyes shining.

Old Man Brown spoke in his ear. "Iffen you was fixin to make up to the Ingram gal, Abe, you air too late. She's a-goin with Willis Youngblood now."

Sure enough, when Abe asked if he might come to see her that Sunday or the next, she hemmed and hawed and mentioned that Willis would be coming over. Abe saw that he might as well give up.

"Dog take it," he thought. "Looks like I'm allus suckin the hind teat."

Despondent, he settled back against the counter. When Tommy came along later, Abe wouldn't talk. He just said, "Howdy," and wouldn't even look up from his whittling.

Some of the men were talking about the cantankerousness of women. Sam Ritter told how his woman had been going to marry Nod Watson. "But like a fool, I beat his time," said Sam. "Old Nod couldn't see I'd done him a good turn. He wanted to whop me for hit."

Moses Lemare said that since the revival the summer before, his life had been pure hell. "'Fore she got religion, Mandy would just bang things in the house an call me names an holler an raise hell in general. Now, ever little thing I do, she starts a-prayin over me."

"That Rever'nd White is shore a powerful preacher," said Old Man Brown. "Ever year when he comes to town, the women go back to git saved all over agin."

Frank Barnett spoke up. "Lemme tell you'uns about that there Rever'nd. All the time he was leadin that there revival, he was a-sellin corn liquor on the side. I know, 'cause I stepped outside one time, an lo an behold, there was Old Josh Hart a-guzzlin a pint. He told me where he got hit an gimme a drink. Hit was pure pizen."

Hez Evarts chuckled. "You'uns know Bessie Folsome, lives over t'other side of Lick Skillet? Well, one time Bessie went up to the mourners' bench to git saved. They was about a dozen went up that night. You gotta give the Rever'nd credit; that man kin preach. Well, that night he'd run backwards a little ways, an then forwards. Then he'd jump up and pop his heels together, an holler out about the far an brimstone. He told the sinners that iffen they didn't come forth an give their hearts to God, they'd burn in hell forever.

"Bessie, she didn't wanta burn. She says this world is bad enough for her. So she got up offen the bench an went an kneeled down at the altar an prayed the Lord to take her

sins away. Kneelin right next to her was Goldie Bennett, who they say hain't exackly a nice gal. Well, the Rever'nd comes down among the mourners to pray with 'em. Bessie says he kneeled down between her an Goldie an put his arms around their shoulders an called on the Lord to help 'em. An Bessie says, right then an there he made a deal with Goldie to meet him outside in the bresh after the service."

"By God, that calls for tarrin an featherin!" Sam exclaimed. "We oughta send word to that scoundrel that iffen he comes here again, he'll git tarred an feathered an run outa town."

"They's some of the women wouldn't hold with that," said Old Man Brown. "That Goldie, now—I heard another one about her. . . ."

All this time Martha Brown had been sitting behind the counter, knitting a sock. None of the men had noticed her until now, when she stood up, looking mad.

"Why, Miz Brown, we didn't know they was no ladies could hear us," said Hez, looking sheepish.

"I heard ever word," she snapped. "Now all you bastards git outa here an go home to your wife. Talk about women gossipin! Give you men enough time, an you'uns'll talk about ever'budy in the County. Git!"

Tommy and Abe were shooed out with the rest, and drifted over to the saloon. There the men were talking about the crops that they were putting in. Suddenly Charley Harper began to hold forth in a tone of voice like a preacher's.

"Who is closer to God, my friends, than he who by his toil an labor gathers in the fruits of the earth? Withouten him, they wouldn't be no corn. Withouten corn, they wouldn't be no corn whisky. See what a fix we'd all be in?"

"Now, that's the truth," said Coon Hesson. "I'll have a drink on that."

About then Old Josh Hart appeared in the doorway. He

peered both ways along the road, acting as if he couldn't decide whether to come in or not, and then ducked quickly inside.

"My wife would git her dander up iffen she knowed I'd even think of comin in here," he said, sidling up to the bar, "but I jest felt like a little nip this mornin."

"Trouble is," Abe told Tommy, "he won't stop with just one nip. You wait an see; he'll have a few, an then his tongue will start a-waggin."

"Hope so," said Tommy. "When these fellers git drunk, that's when they tell you ever'thing they know. You kin learn a plenty in here."

After his third nip, Old Josh spoke up. "Ary of you fellers remember Sissy Scales, useta live here in town? That was quite a spell back. Reckon Tommy an Abe here was still a-wearin hippens then."

"Tell us about Sissy, Uncle Josh," Tommy urged.

"Well, iffen I had another little nip . . ."

"I'll stand you one," said Baldy Bill Jones. "I wanta hear the story, an I don't want you goin round a-sayin I never boughten you a drink."

"Bill, you old son-of-a-gun, you air a sight more free-hearted than some of these here skinflints. Ah, that was good."

Somebody pushed a bench under Old Josh and he began.

"This here Sissy was a spindlin child that growed up to be a real purty gal. She growed up so fast, though, her ma couldn't keep up with the gal, lettin her dresses down. One day Sissy come a-traipsin down the road here with her ankles a-showin. Me an some other fellers was a-settin on the porch of the store, an while we was a-feastin our eyes on her ankles, we seen somethin white kinda peekin out from under her dress. We thought hit was a petticoat, but turned out hit was Sissy's drawers. They'd started a-slippin,

an 'fore she knowed hit, that pore gal's drawers fell down around her feet, right there in front of the store.

"We never seen Sissy agin after that. She was so ashamed, she couldn't face none of the fellers, an left the state. Went clear to Ioway or somewheres. I heard she got married an done all right. Now, warn't hit a good thing that gal lost her drawers? Iffen she'd stayed here, she'd likely be married now to one of these numbskulls."

Telling the story had made Old Josh pretty dry.

"Give him another," Coon told the saloonkeeper. "I'll pay you next week, when my wife sells some of her old hens."

Old Josh had a couple more, and now when he spat at the ash box, he sometimes missed. Trickle of tobacco juice were staining the white fringe which connected his sideburns under his chin.

Baldy Bill had been keeping up with Old Josh right along, and had fallen into a sorrowful mood. "Boys, I'm a-slippin. I hain't the man I useta be."

"That comes of runnin to the widders all the time," said Old Josh. "I been all along that road, an I know."

"I've had me a time, though," said Baldy Bill. He and the other fellows began swapping stories and bragging about all the loving they had done.

Listening to this talk, Abe was feeling mighty grown up, until Coon pointed a thumb at him and Tommy and remarked in a teasing tone, "Betcha these here saplins don't even know what we air a-talkin about."

"The hell I don't," Tommy answered indignantly. "I've already started livin. But old Abe here, he's afeard. Looks like the world's a-gonna pass him by."

The men guffawed. Coon, with a great show of surprise, inquired, "Abe, hain't you older'n Tommy?"

"Some," Abe admitted, squirming with embarrassment, "but I reckon he's got more nerve than me."

Tommy rushed to Abe's defense. "Betcha iffen I could git Abe to try hit onst, they'd be no holdin him. One of these days he'll bust loose, an when he does, all you fellers that have wives an daughters better look out."

"Hold on, Tommy," Abe protested. "I hain't a-fixin to harm nobody's wife or daughters."

"He means hit, too," said Old Josh. "Leave Abe alone, you fellers. But that Tommy, now—I wouldn't put nothin past him."

Abe insisted on leaving now, and Tommy went along. Tommy wanted to tease Abe some more about letting the world pass him by, but Abe shut him up. "I hain't worried none. I'll git mine when the time comes."

Abe could feel the sap rising in him, though, and was beginning to think that he was missing something.

In front of the store they ran into Martha Smith. Abe's curiosity had been aroused by all he'd heard about her from Tommy, and so while he was being introduced, he looked her over. For a girl her age, Martha had quite a lush figure. Abe's eyes lingered on her budding breasts. He saw her smooth red lips curved in a smile, and it annoyed him that the smile was all for Tommy. Then he became annoyed with himself. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind that Betty was the girl he loved. Why, then, did he feel drawn toward Martha?

"Abe Lincoln," he told himself angrily, "you air actin jest like a salt-hongry cow." Taking his leave of Tommy and Martha, he went along home and got to work splitting wood.

"Ma, here comes the Lincolns," Willie called from the yard, and Melinda came to the door. Betsy ran and hid behind the ash hopper; she was always shy at first when company came, though later she would attach herself to either Tom or Abe and talk his ear off. The other Garrisons welcomed the guests. Then, when Tommy had helped Sarah,

Elizabeth and Sally, down from the wagon and Joe and Isaac had unyoked the oxen the whole company trooped into the house.

"My, she's a purty young'un," Sarah cooed over Lyddy. "Look at them curls all over her head! Which side of the family does she git her curly hair from?"

"Now, that's a question," said Isaac, frowning ostentatiously. "Come to think of hit, that hoss trader that come through here the year before she was borned had curly hair." Melinda pretended to hit him with a broom.

"Hit's you she takes after, Isaac," said Tom, and Isaac beamed with pride.

Sarah sat down with the little girl in her lap, while Melinda and Sally bustled around setting the table, with Melinda pausing every now and then to tuck in a stray wisp that had escaped from the tight little twist of hair on the back of her head. They exchanged all the gossip they had heard lately.

"I hear the Widder Smith's daughter has growed up so purty, she has all the boys in the county a-chasin after her," said Sally.

"Like all their pa's air a-runnin to see her ma." Melinda pointed a finger at Isaac. "Iffen I ever ketch Isaac Garrison a-goin over there, I'll beat the tar outen him. An iffen ary one of my boys even think of goin there, I swear I'll tie him to a tree."

Tommy looked up and winked at Abe. He had been eyeing Sarah for several minutes. "You shore look purty," he had told her. But Sarah, having decided long ago that Tommy was too young for her, had paid him no attention.

When dinner was dished up and everyone was seated at the table, Isaac asked Tom Lincoln to say grace. Abe, breathing in the rich smell of chicken and dumplings, thought ruefully, "Hit'll be the same prayer he's been a-sayin ever

since I kin remember. I wish he'd cut hit short jest this onst, but he won't. Yep, here hit comes."

"We thank Thee, Father, for this evidence of thy bounty," Tom began in a slow and solemn rhythm.

"We got the bounty right here," Tommy was thinking. "Let's hurry up an eat hit."

"And for this assurance," Tom continued relentlessly, even more slowly, "that through Thy love we are abundantly blessed with health, harmony, and unfailing love. Amen."

Now everyone brightened up, as the platter of chicken and dumplings started around the table. Tom took a leg and passed the dish on to Sarah, who would have liked a leg, too, but for the sake of manners selected a smaller piece. To Tommy it seemed hours before the platter got around to him, and by then there were no drumsticks left. He helped himself to a mess of dumplings and what he thought was a passable piece of chicken; but when he pushed the dumplings aside, he found that he had a mere wing.

Betsy, seeing his dismay, piped up, "What ails you, Tommy? Air you sick?"

"Naw, I jest hain't much hongry now."

"Fiddlesticks," said Melinda. "You'll eat with a comin appetite, I know." And to Sally, "They won't be a dump-lin left when these here boys git through."

Sure enough, the last smear of gravy had been sopped up when the men and boys drifted out into the yard. After a while Tommy led Abe around behind the barn. From a special hiding place in the bushes, he produced a jug.

"This here is some of Ma's elderberry wine. Let's take a walk."

They were careful to keep the barn between them and the cabin until they were safely out of sight. Something—perhaps the smell of spring in the air—started Abe thinking of Betty.

"How air you an Betty gettin along?" he asked Tommy, wondering if he had found out yet about Willis Youngblood.

"Not so good. She found out I been a-goin to see Martha Smith, an now she won't even speak to me." Tommy kicked a rock hard enough to send it sailing, but then he said, "Well, Betty hain't the onliest apple on the tree."

Abe remembered how Tommy had been making up to Sarah a few minutes before. "You shore air a wild one, Tommy. You wanta go with 'em all."

"Why not?" said Tommy, grinning.

In a secluded spot in the woods they settled down on a log and went to work on the jug. Pretty soon both boys were feeling pretty good.

"What say we sashay over to the Smith place?" Tommy suggested. "You kin talk to the Widder while I'm a-sparkin Martha."

Abe thought it over. "Well, I reckon hit won't hurt me none."

"Come on, then. Iffen we kin git there afore the wine dies down in you, you might even cut loose an do a little lovin."

Abe was more than a little scared when they knocked on the Widow's door, and the moment the door opened, he became completely tongue-tied.

"Well, howdy, boys. Come right in," the Widow said, giving them a big smile. "Martha hain't home today, Tommy. She's a-workin over at the Gentrys' for a spell. You know Flora Gentry's got a new baby."

As Abe had heard, the Widow Smith was a good-looking woman, and she certainly was friendly. "Now, you'uns set right down," she urged, gently pushing Abe down on a bench. To his surprise, she ran her fingers through his hair. "What's yore name, honey?"

"This here is Abe Lincoln, Mandy," said Tommy.

The Widow seated herself on the bench, as close to Abe

as she could possibly get. "Land's sake, honey, for a young feller you look mighty solemn."

Again Tommy came to the rescue of his tongue-tied friend. "Abe's ma died not so long ago."

"I'm right sorry to hear that." She sighed, and her smile faded. "Iffen my ma had lived a little while longer than she did, my whole life would of been different. I wouldn't never of married Dan Smith, that run off an left me when Martha was a baby. I never did hear what become of him. Since then hit's been hard sleddin. I hafta make my livin the best way I kin."

In his sympathy, Abe lost most of his fear of her, but he still didn't know what to do or say. Once more Tommy took charge, saying, "Let's all have some of this here wine."

Isaac and Tom leaned on the top rail of the hog pen, watching the piglets scrambling over each other to get to the sow's teats.

"These here air the ones I aim to git rid of," said Isaac. "Them others'll give us our meat for the winter. With three heifers jest come fresh, I'm li'ble to run short of corn."

"Well, I got a plenty of corn planted." Tom wanted to buy, provided Isaac could wait for the money until Tom and Dennis had finished the cabin they were building for Coon Hesson and his bride. The two men shook hands on the deal.

"What say we mosey over to Loafer Station?" Isaac proposed. "We might have a little nip."

With Isaac, one nip always called for another, and in no time he and Tom were more than half full. They strolled back toward the Garrison place, talking about crops part of the time, but mostly cracking jokes.

"Let's rest a spell," said Tom, pointing to a log. "My legs air a mite shaky."

He took a bite from his twist of tobacco and passed the

twist to Isaac. Then Isaac produced the pint of red-eye that he had bought in town, and they had a little nip "jest to clean their mouths."

They were silent for a while, watching an ant crawling away along the log.

"We better git," said Tom. "That ant's a-comin back with all his relations, an they'll be all over us." He spat in the middle of the ant tribe, scattering its members in all directions.

It was Isaac who suggested that they pay a call on the Widow Smith. "They say she's a whizbang."

They had another nip and walked over to the Widow's place. When they neared the cabin, Isaac hesitated and looked all around to see if anyone else was in the neighborhood.

"I know Lindy. Iffen this was to git out, an Lindy heard, I'd be a-lookin for another woman shore enough. Likely she wouldn't even let me in the house. I'd jest hafta leave the county."

They killed the pint to get up their courage, and then walked up to the door and knocked. When they heard the Widow call, "Come in," Isaac pulled the latchstring and they sauntered into the cabin, both grinning widely. Then their grins froze on their faces. Both men stood stock still, turning alternately white and red.

"Howdy, Pa," Abe said calmly. For a minute there, he and Tommy had been scared, until they had seen that their pa's were more embarrassed than they were.

Isaac mumbled something about dropping in to see if Mrs. Smith wanted to buy some hogs, and Tommy with an air of angelic innocence, explained that he and Abe had come to see Martha, who wasn't home. Then Tom said it was getting late, and the four callers made their excuses to the Widow and left together.

On the way back to the Garrison place, Isaac inquired, "What give you snotnoses the idee of goin over there? Bet hit was some talk you heard in the saloon."

"I hain't a-saying, an that's proof enough," Tommy answered.

"Well, you know yore ma wouldn't like hit. We better not say nothin about this at home."

Tommy winked and nodded. Abe promised Tom not to say anything to Sally. And so the incident remained a secret among the four of them. It was never forgotten, though, for neither Abe nor Tommy was above a wink or a sly remark every now and then. After that, the boys never had much trouble getting their pas' permission to come and go as they pleased.

YOU KNOW WHAT, MA?

T'other day Tommy was a-talkin about gittin married. Reckon hit was jest talk, though—he hain't hardly old enough. Besides, Tommy's a-goin with that Martha Smith; like they say in the store, he's swingin her high. Iffen hit was me, I'd be afeard to marry Martha; I'd be skeered she might turn out like her ma.

"You know, Ma, I feel right sorry for the Widder. The things the men tell on her—why, that woman hain't fitten to run with the outside hogs . . . I feel sorry for Martha, too. Maybe hit wasn't fair to say what I jest did about her; likely the gal's all right. She can't help what her ma does.

"Ma, what would you think of me gittin married? I know; you'd say that I wasn't old enough, either. I was jest a-thinkin hit might not be so lonesome as like now. They's only one gal I'd ever wanta git married to, though, an she likes another feller better'n me. I'd give a good saddle hoss, iffen I had one, to go with Betty, an I wouldn't be like Tommy; I wouldn't never look at no other gal.

"I think he still likes Betty, though. He jest don't know who he likes. Now, I know who I like, all right, but hit don't git me nowheres.

"Wished I knowed for shore iffen you kin hear me when I talk to you, Ma. Reckon God could gimme a sign, but I hain't got the gall to ast Him. You know, Pa must of told somebody how I come up here all the time to talk to you. Or maybe it was Tilda or little Johnny that told. Anyways, when I go to the crossroads now, they's some folks that look at me kinda queerlike; they think I'm tetched." Abe sighed profoundly. "I don't know what I'd do iffen I couldn't talk to you, Ma. I reckon iffen you kin lean down from heaven and hear me, I could jest as well talk to you anywheres. I could jest do hit in my mind. But I like to come here."

Abe was indeed a lonesome boy these days. Though he liked most people and they liked him, he seemed to live mostly inside himself. Still, his life was not altogether sad, for one thing, because his sense of humor rarely failed him, and for another, because he found a lot of pleasure in books. By doing odd jobs he had earned enough cash money for several books, which he had ridden or walked to Rockport to buy. In addition, Mr. Garrison had given him a book which the Garrison family had brought with them from Ohio. Because it was a gift, Abe treasured that one most of all.

Except when he was reading, Abe kept his precious little library in a special hiding place in the loft, where it would be safe from children's prying little fingers and from his pa's disapproving eye. Tom Lincoln still didn't "hold much with book larnin." He couldn't complain that studying ever kept Abe from getting his work done on the place, but it was true that the boy sometimes sacrificed his sleep. In the winter evenings he would read at the table after supper for as long as he dared, and then, when the hour came when

burning a candle was a reckless extravagance, he would lie on his belly before the hearth and read by the flickering light of the fire.

One evening his stepma asked the boy a question about some household matter, but Abe was so deep in his studies that he didn't hear her.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" his pa asked. "Has readin made you deaf? You'd be better off a-takin notice of what goes on around you, steada holdin yore nose to them flyspecks on paper ever minute."

Abe apologized hastily and clutched his book with nervous fingers; for a moment it looked as if his pa might do something he had done once before—grab the book and throw it in the fire. But then Sally intervened.

"Now, Tom," she said gently, "the boy's doin the right thing, a-tryin to learn. He'll be better off than you, that can't hardly sign yore name. I shore wished I knowed how to read an write."

"Well, they's sech a thing as too much of a good thing," Tom grumbled. "Ever time I pick up the shovel now, hit's kivered with writin an figgers."

"You leave Abe alone with his figgerin," Sally told him firmly. "Hit'll come in handy someday, an he kin learn the young'uns."

Abe's heart filled with gratitude. Just to be on the safe side, he closed his book for that night and took it up to the hiding-place, but he knew that as long as his stepma stuck up for him, his library was safe and he could keep on studying. While he was up in the loft, he heard her saying, "You mark my words, Tom. That boy will amount to something someday."

And so Abe continued to read by the fire at night. Sometimes, though, his eyes strayed from the page and he just gazed at the fire, dreaming wistfully of Betty. He had never

completely given up hope of winning her. It didn't seem possible that she could like that Willis Youngblood as much as she had liked Tommy, and so Abe told himself, "Maybe her an Willis will git played out. That's when I wanta be handy. Maybe I'll have a chanst with her then. If I could go with her, I'd be the happiest mortal in the world."

Once, after everyone else had gone to bed, he searched in the stack of firewood, found a piece with one fairly smooth surface, and wrote on it:

Betty Ingraham,
 Pretty as a peach.
 If I can't have her
 I'll go out of reach.

He admired his poem for a minute, then chucked it in the fire so that Tom wouldn't find it in the morning. Then he climbed up to bed.

The next year, when spring came, he took to hanging around the store every single Saturday just for the chance to look at her; there was no law against looking. A couple of times she gave him a polite little smile and spoke a few words to him, and each time that put him in a dreamy mood for days.

One Saturday in May he woke up feeling extra good. He had a feeling in his bones that he would see Betty today. As he rode into town he was thinking that a day as beautiful as this by rights ought to be a lucky one.

As he entered the store, Old Josh hailed him, saying, "That's a right purty shirt you got, young feller. A new one?"

"Yep. My stepma made hit for me. She wove the cloth last winter on her loom."

Old Man Brown had never been a great hand for mind-

ing his own business. "You an her git along all right?" he inquired. "I heard she was a kinda high-falutin woman."

"Naw, she's jest as common as the rest of us," Abe protested. Remembering how she stuck up for him about his studying, he added, "Next to my own ma, she couldn't be beat."

"How's yore pa? Is he a-comin inta town today?"

"Don't reckon so. He's got church business today. Brother an Sister Hornback had a fight an separated, an so Pa an a couple other deacons has went to try to git the trouble arned out and bring the brother an sister back inta the church."

"Hit's a good thing somebody's a-trying to git people to do right," said Old Man Brown. "Folks air a-gittin so devilish mean nowadays, I dunno what the good Lord's a-gonna do about hit."

He and old Mrs. Hesson started a discussion of how the young people were carrying on these days. "You take that Tommy Garrison, now," the midwife said. "There's a wild one, for shore."

"That's jest the way I was when I first started out," Old Josh bragged, and added, "He'll git cooled off one of these days."

Martha Brown mentioned a rumor that Betty Ingram and her beau had had a quarrel. "Betty's a real nice gal," she hastened to say, "jest kinda high-strung."

When Abe heard this, he nearly swallowed his chew. He had been chewing tobacco for some time now. He had never decided whether or not he liked the stuff, but chewed anyways, because a fellow who had already grown as tall as most men was expected to act like a man. At this moment, though, it was hard for him to keep from acting childish. He wanted to whoop like an Indian and jump up in the air.

Only a few minutes later he saw Betty and her ma com-

ing through the doorway. Quickly he smoothed his hair, praying that the one stubborn lock which always wanted to stand straight out from his head would behave itself just this once. As soon as Mrs. Ingram was busy with her trading, he sidled over to Betty.

"Howdy," he said shyly.

"Howdy, Abe," she answered pleasantly.

He asked after her folks and she asked after his, and then he cautiously inquired, "How's Willis?"

Betty's cheeks flushed. With her blue eyes and with the dark ringlets frothing over her shoulders, she looked as pretty, Abe thought, as a picture in a frame.

"Willis's over to Rockport," she said, and tossed her head. "For all I keer, he kin stay there."

Again Abe wanted to whoop. He could feel himself grinning like a fool.

"Kin I come over to see you tomorrer?" he asked.

Betty hesitated, but then she saw his hungry eyes, still full of sadness despite the grin. "Well, yes, iffen you wanta."

Abe went home that day walking on air.

At supper that evening Dennis and Elizabeth announced that as soon as the preacher got around to the Little Pigeon Church on his circuit again, they were going to get married. They waited to see how the folks were going to take the news, and then Dennis, looking puzzled, asked, "What air you'uns a-grinnin at?"

"Hit hain't like you two was tellin us no news," Tom answered. "Reckon we all seen the love-light in yore eyes."

Sally wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron and then, smiling again, told her daughter, "I'm right glad, honey. You picked a fine feller, an I think hit's a good thing to have yore children while you air young."

Now Dennis and Elizabeth could sit frankly holding hands. "Wished hit was me an Betty," Abe thought.

That night, up in the loft, he lay awake thinking of her. He wanted to propose to her the next day, but supposed he'd better wait. In his imagination he asked her to marry him, and she said yes. He kissed her and she kissed him back, and she said, "Iffen Ma thinks we air too young, I'll wait for you, Abe."

"Oh, my darlin," Abe whispered, hugging his pillow.

Next day he spent the whole morning primping for his date. When at last he had his hair slicked down to suit him, he had Sarah tie his tie. Right after dinner he saddled old Barney and rode off whistling.

"Hit's good to see the boy actin cheerful," Sally remarked to Tom.

"Yep. Heard him a-whistlin last night, too, while he was feedin the stock. Looks like he's a-thinkin about the girls." Tom picked up a stick to whittle on. "Hit won't be so long now before me an you'll be livin here alone, Sally. Reckon I'd better start a-buildin cabins all over the place. 'Fore long, the woods'll be runnin wild with our gran'childern."

Abe received a warm welcome at the Ingrams'. Mrs. Ingram had told her husband, "Iffen Betty throws Willis over, I'd kinda like to see her take a interest in some good, steady boy like Abe Lincoln."

Betty reproved Abe for not coming in time for dinner, and he didn't remind her that she'd forgotten to invite him. She introduced her big brother Jake, her sister Sally, who was a few years younger than Betty, and Sammy. Then she took him to the barn lot to show him her pet wild goose.

"We call him Old Jake, after my brother. Jake shot at some geese last spring, an this one come down with a hurt wing, but still livin. Jake was gonna kill hit for the pot, but the rest of us wouldn't let him, so he turned hit loose with our own geese. Purty soon Old Jake was tame as any we got." She showed how the wild goose would come at her call and eat out of her hand.

"Come fall, a flock of wild geese flew over, a-headin' south. They was flyin in a big V—you know the way they do—an all a-honkin. Old Jake started a-honkin too, and then he flew up in the air an took out after 'em. Sally an Sammy an me all cried like anything; we was sure he was gone forever. But 'fore long he come back and kinda strutted 'round like he was glad to be home. Reckon now he's settled down."

"Iffen I had the chanst to be near you, Betty," said Abe, "I'd shore settle down too, an never fly off nowheres."

"Aw, Abe, that's jest blarney."

"No hit hain't."

Just about then Frank Barnett rode up to the house to ask the Ingrams if they heard yet about the people who'd been struck by lightning.

"Happened jest this noon," he told them. "After church the Boras went home with the Overtons for dinner. Sally Overton, she'd fixed up a picnic dinner, an so while the men took a walk around the fields, Bertha Bora an Sally's little boy helped carry the stuff an spread hit out under a big tree in the back yard. But then hit began to rain. You remember how that shower come up all of a sudden. Sally was runnin toward the house, a-trying her best to git back there with the vittles afore they would git soaked, when the lightning come. She says they was a *crack* she could hear right through the thunder, an when she turned around, that big tree was split plumb in two, and there was Bertha an the little boy a-layin on the ground."

Everyone exclaimed in horror, and Betty's ma said, "Pore Sally!"

"Yep, hit's a hard thing," said Frank. "Sally run an got the young'un an carried him in the house. She tried to bring him to, but she couldn't. She cried an prayed over him for quite a spell afore she finely got hit through her head that he was gone. Sally says, all this time she never even thunk

of Bertha. Then she remembered an went back. She hollered for the men, but they couldn't hear. Then she tried to move Bertha by herself; figgered hit warn't decent to leave her a-layin in the rain. But Sally warn't strong enough to even drag the body. You know Bertha was a big woman. When the men finely come, hit took both of 'em to lift the body inta Henry Bora's wagon, so's he could take her home."

When he had told his tale, Frank rode on to the Overtons' to help make the coffin, and Betty's pa went with him. Abe knew that his own Pa and Dennis would be doing the same thing at the Boras'. Betty's ma said she'd go over to the Overtons' the first thing in the morning, and she began to plan what victuals she'd cook to take along.

"Would you like to ride over there now?" Abe asked Betty.

Betty wanted very much to go, and she hurried to put on the heavy riding skirt which her ma had made her to protect her dresses. Abe rode old Barney up close to the fence, so that Betty could climb the fence and get on behind. Abe felt little chills running through him when she put her arms around his middle to hold on.

Riding into the Overtons' yard among all the people, he felt mighty proud, and hoped everyone noticed who was with him. While Abe tied his horse, Betty took off her riding skirt and hung it on the fence.

They were just turning toward the house when Tommy Garrison rode up with Martha Smith behind him on the mare. Betty's eyes lit up at first, and Abe wondered, "Why can't she never git that starry look for me?" As soon as she noticed Martha, though, Betty's face changed and grew stiff.

Abe expected Tommy to say howdy and crack some joke, as he usually did, but to Abe's surprise, Tommy scowled darkly and turned his back on his friend and Betty.

When Tommy tied the mare, he took Martha by the arm and walked off across the yard without saying a word.

"By God, he's jealous," Abe thought. "He still likes Betty—better'n Martha, too. Well, hit won't do him no good iffen I kin help hit; he had his chanst." Remembering that welcoming flash in Betty's eyes, Abe felt a twinge of pain. "She still likes him, too, an he jest hain't got the sense to know hit."

With other members of the gathering crowd, Abe and Betty filed into the house to pay their respects to the dead and offer their condolences to the family. It was heartbreaking to see the sweet-looking little boy lying so still on the bed, with his mother kneeling beside him, sobbing and begging God to give him back to her. Afterwards Abe and Betty walked out into the yard to see the scene of the disaster and to marvel at the tree split down its middle. Then, since so many neighbors had gathered that no one else was needed to help, the two young people started home.

Old Barney was feeling fine as a filly today, and when Abe gave him his head, he burst into a gallop. Betty had to hold on tight then to keep from falling off. Abe found this a wonderful feeling. The old horse soon slowed down, of course, and then Abe held him to a walk for a while, for Abe didn't want this ride to end too soon. In fact, he would have liked it to go on forever. Now Betty slackened her hold, and by and by she took her arms away altogether, in order to point out some pretty flowers by the wayside. Abe didn't like that so much, and so he gave Barney a little kick to start him up again. Then Betty held on tight again, so tight it hurt. Abe didn't mind that, though.

The second time Abe pulled his little trick Betty laughed and chided him. "Abe Lincoln, you air a-doin this a-purpose."

"Well now, is they some other way I could git you to hug me?"

All too soon the ride was over. Betty's ma asked Abe to stay for supper, and sat him down at a table so loaded with food that he asked whether this was someone's birthday. Abe was ravenously hungry now, and when Betty's pa bowed his head to say grace, Abe earnestly hoped that it would be a short one. "They's nothin worser than a long strung-out prayer when a person's hongry," he thought. By making it a short one, Mr. Ingram proved himself a man after Abe's own heart.

After supper Abe and Betty walked down the lane a little way and stopped under an old oak tree. One big root stuck out high enough above the ground to make a good seat.

"Look at this old tree, how gnarly hit is," said Abe. "Hit puts me in mind of a old man that's jest a-settin, waitin for his time to die. Bet this here tree was here when Noah passed over in the ark."

Betty laughed. "Reckon so. My pa says nobody kin remember when this tree looked a bit different."

They investigated a hole which a squirrel apparently had used during the winter to store its nuts. Then Abe pointed out several smaller holes grouped together higher up. Betty said they reminded her of the post office in the store, and Abe remarked, "One of them holes would be a good place to put somethin iffen you had some kinda secret."

Now he asked, "Kin I come back next Sunday?"

"Well, Abe, I dunno. Willis might be back, an— well, I jest can't decide."

"I'll come by, then, maybe sometime Friday, an ast you."

"Well, maybe you better not come right up to the house. Willis's powerful jealous, an iffen you was to run inta him, they'd be trouble."

That part of it didn't worry Abe. "I kin handle Willis."
"No, I don't want you an him a-fightin."

"Tell you what, then. You write me a note an leave hit in this here tree, in that hole highest up, where nobody'll see hit. Kin you reach that high?"

Betty tried and found she could. "This here'll be our post office," she agreed.

On the way back to her house she let him hold her hand, and Abe began to have hopes that he might get a kiss; but in the yard she sort of slipped away from him and stood just out of reach while she told him good night. Abe watched her hungrily until she disappeared into the house, and then he rode off to worry about his chances and to dream.

*A*BE, FORKING DOWN CLEAN straw from the barn loft, looked out and saw Sarah and Elizabeth coming from the house, each with her stool and bucket, to do the milking. Then came Tilda and Johnny with a pan to get corn, and all the chickens on the place, knowing the corn would be for them, came flapping and running to follow the children in a restless squawking fan.

"Abe, come down here and help me," Sarah called. "This here calf is hard to handle." She and Elizabeth were struggling to get the half-weaned calf away from its mother and into a pen, so that Sarah could milk the cow.

Tom as well as Abe came to help. "We better keep this here calf penned up a few days," he said. "Hit's too big an stout now to be still a-suckin hits mammy."

When the calf was penned, Tom leaned on the top rail, looking thoughtful. "Abe, I'll tell you what I'm a mind to do. I'm a-gonna give you this here little heifer. You raise hit, an next year, God willin, hit'll come fresh, an then you'll have two critters. That'll help you to git yore start."

Abe was delighted. "I'm shore thankful to you, Pa."

"I want you to know, son, hit was the woman who was the first to think of hit."

Tom spat, and by an unhappy accident, Johnny's old hound walked right into the stream. "Serves you right," Tom said to the dog. "That'll learn you not to git too close when I'm a-chawin." To Abe he said, "You air purty near growed now, son, an I take notice you air a-sparkin the gals. Someday you'll wanta git married. They's no hurry; you got a plenty of time. But when you air ready, I'll give you five acres offen the place. What I got in mind is the part on t'other side of the hill, over by the meetin house."

"Why, Pa, that's the best land you got!"

"Well, son, I'm a pore man—allus was an allus will be. I never got no help from nobody. That's why I wanta do the best I kin to help you git started. You know your ma would like that, an yore stepma, too."

Abe was overwhelmed. From that moment on he worked harder than ever before, clearing more land and planting the field he'd cleared the year before. And each day, when he went to feed his calf, he lingered awhile, watching and admiring it.

"You little devil, you air a-growin faster'n a yaller-tater vine."

The calf would come up to him and put its nose in his hand, and sometimes lick his fingers.

"What'll I call you, little heifer? A purty little calf like you oughta have a purty name. I know; I'll call you Nancy, after Ma. No, hold on." When you were thinking of pretty things, you couldn't leave out Betty. "What say we name you Nancy Betty? There, now; you got the two purtiest names in the world."

It occurred to Abe that the Betty part of the name would lead to teasing by various members of the family, and by

others, too. Stroking the calf's head, he said in a confidential tone, "We won't tell nobody, though, what yore real name is. I'll jest call you N.B. You hear, little N.B.? Me an you have got a secret."

What with the calf and the prospect of owning land, Abe felt as if he were already a man of some substance. "Let's see," he mused. "Iffen N.B. drops a heifer next year, then come another year, her an the heifer will both come fresh, an I'll have four head of cattle. That might be the time to trade a calf or two for hogs."

He could hardly wait to discuss this question with Betty, for he wanted her to know that if she would marry him, he'd have something more than a mouthful of talk to offer her. He was eager, too, to tell her how hard he'd work to take care of her. She'd never have to work in the fields, or anything like that. Why, he'd even milk the cows for her. And he'd keep studying and learning until he found a way to better himself. By God, he wasn't going to be a poor man all his life. Before he was through, Betty would be living like a queen.

What with all this planning and figuring in addition to the hard work, Abe found the days between Sunday and Friday passing more quickly than he had expected. On Thursday night, falling asleep to the lullaby of rain pattering on the roof just over his head, he dreamed that he held Betty in his arms. He kissed her eyebrows and her pudgy little nose, and she nestled her head on his shoulder. It seemed only a moment before Pa was calling, "Git up, son. Hit's near daybreak."

Abe rushed like fury through his morning work, and then got ready to ride over to the hollow-tree post office. He tore the flyleaf from one of his books, and with a well-sharpened quill, wrote in a careful hand:

DEAR BETTY:

Pa give me a calf, and I got lots more to tell you. I sure hope you will let me come see you on Sunday.

Yours respectfully,

ABE LINCOLN

After he had signed the note, he wondered if it might not be proper to say something about love. He did want her to know he loved her.

"Well, I kin prob'ly write hit better'n I kin say it," he thought, and added: "P.S. I love you."

At the oak tree he found that the hole which he and Betty had agreed to use was empty. Just in case there had been some misunderstanding, he explored the other holes in the tree, but found nothing; it was plain that he had come too early in the day. He settled down to wait, but then thought, "S'posin Willis was to come along. He'd shore wonder how come I'm a-hanging around so close to Betty's house. Likely they'd be a fight. I know I'd whop him, but then Betty would be mad at me. Reckon I better do my waitin at the crossroads."

Leaving his note in the proper place, he rode away, reluctantly. He kept looking back over his shoulder, hoping to see Betty coming down the lane, but his only reward was a crick in the neck.

For a while he hung around in the store, whittling, too deep in his own thoughts to pay any attention to the gossip. But when someone spoke Betty's name, his ears pricked up.

"An they say he brung her a fine present, spent a lotta money for hit. A whatchacallit—one of them harps you hold on yore lap and play with a thimble, like."

So Willis had brought Betty a present from Rockport. This was not exactly cheering news; Abe remembered hearing people say that presents went a long way toward win-

ning a girl's heart. In a worried frame of mind, he left the store and moseyed down the road.

A hail caused him to look around, and there was Tommy in the blacksmith shop, hard at work. "I'm helpin out Bil Shucks here so's to git me some cash money," Tommy explained. "Now I'm jest about to stop an eat. Come around back with me, Abe, an help me with this passel of vittles Ma put up."

Sprawling on the grass behind the blacksmith shop, the boys shared Tommy's lunch.

"How long you been a-workin here?" Abe asked.

"Couple days now. Got to git me some money to buy a birthday present for my woman."

Abe looked at Tommy sharply. "Did I hear what I think I heard?"

"Shore you did. I said I got me a woman. Sweet as a apple dumplin too. You know who."

Abe thought, "You kin have that kinda apple dumplin Hit hain't good enough for me." Since it would hardly be polite to say that out loud, he changed the subject, telling Tommy about his calf. "Pa says maybe next year N.B. will have a calf. Iffen hit's a heifer, in another year I'll have two more calfs. Or s'posin one of the cows was to drop twin calfs . . ."

Tommy caught the spirit of the thing, and together the boys calculated how many cattle Abe might possibly have in three, four years, five, and ten.

"Hold on, don't go no farther," said Abe. "We got me feelin so rich, seems like I oughta go right now an git me a silk hat to go with hit."

"A good thing humans hain't like cows," said Tommy. "S'posin little gals a year old could have babies. They wouldn't be room in the world for all the people."

"That's right," said Abe. "Prob'ly you couldn't see a blade

of this here grass, cause hit would be kivered up with cryin babies."

The boys laughed heartily together. This was fine, friendly laughter, and yet, remembering how Tommy had behaved at the Overtons', Abe didn't feel quite comfortable in his company. It was a bad thing, Abe thought, when love and friendship pulled against each other. If he had to choose, love would surely win, for Abe loved Betty so much it hurt. But he did want to keep Tommy as his friend. Maybe this was a good time to try to clear the air.

"Look here, Tommy. Seein Martha is yore woman, I reckon you got no claim on Betty."

At the mention of Betty, Tommy's face became stormy. He jabbed the ground with his pocketknife, saying nothing.

"You ack like you got some kinda claim on Betty jest 'cause hit was you that seen her first," Abe persisted. "But they hain't no way you kin have her an Martha both. I aim to ast Betty to marry me. What say, Tommy? No hard feelins?"

Tommy stabbed the earth a few more times, and said grudgingly, "Naw, I reckon not." But gradually his face cleared, and in a friendly and more cheerful tone he added, "No hard feelins, Abe." That made Abe feel a lot better.

Tommy filled his corn-cob pipe and lit up. "I useta think I loved Betty; felt like I couldn't git along withouten her. But hit's Martha that gives me my good times."

Now he lay back on the grass and puffed smoke at the sky. "Reckon I take after my old gran'pappy. I remember how he useta say to me, 'Boy, you don't pass through this here world but onst; when you air gone, you can't come back. An you never know but what you'll die tomorrer. So when you see a chanst to have a little fun, grab hit while the grabbin's good. Don't hang back; tear right in and have yoreself a time. That way you won't miss out on nothin.'

"Gramp never missed a thing. He'd say, 'Look at me, boy.' His face was wrinkled up like a nutmeg, but you could still see the devilment a-twinklin in his eye. 'Look at me,' he'd say. 'If ever they was a Garrison that had a good time in this life, hit was me. Whiskey, women, tradin—whatever fun they was to have, I had hit; didn't let nothin stand in my way. Hit hain't never hurt me none.' Gramp lived to ninety-two, an he drank a pint of whiskey on the day he died."

Abe plucked at the grass and kept silent. This way of looking at this was new to him, an he wouldn't have much to say about it until he'd had more time to think it over.

"One of these days," said Tommy, "I reckon me an Martha'll sashay over to Booneville an git hitched."

Abe couldn't believe this. "Air you a-tryin to tell me you air a-fixin to marry a gal that hain't respectable?"

"Why not? They's nothin wrong with Martha. She hain't her ma, an I know for shore nobody's took nothin away from her—nobody but me. Iffen some folks look down on her, why should I give a damn?"

"Gramp useta say most people wasted the best part of their life a-worryin about what other people might be a-thinkin about 'em. He'd say, 'Don't try to please the neighbors; please yoreself.' Gramp was a good man; allus had a helpin hand for ary person that needed one. Same time, he allus done exactly like he pleased. I aim to do likewise."

"I kin see the sense in that," Abe said. "Jest the same, hit looks to me like you air a-fixin to do somethin you don't wanta do, jest to prove you got the nerve to do hit. Seems to me, iffen a feller got hitched to the wrong girl, he'd be a-missin out on a lot, all the rest of his natchel life."

Tommy's face took on a stubborn look. "Martha's all right with me. You choose the apple; I pick the peach. Anyways,"

he said with a grin, "most likely I'll hafta marry her. The way we been a-goin, iffen I don't marry the gal, they'll be a passel of wood colts runnin around here afore long."

As always, Tommy's braggin tickled Abe. "The way you talk, Tommy, I wonder you'uns hain't had a couple afore now."

"Gimme time, gimme time. I hain't had my woman long enough. Hit takes nine months from the start, you know. Or hain't you learned even that much yet?"

"Oh, I found that out a spell back, but I hain't never told nobody else. Hit might git around. My policy is: Take ever'thing in; don't let nothin out."

"I believe you, Abe, that you never let nothin out. Someday you air li'ble to swell up an bust. Whyn't you start livin like a natchel man?"

Abe dropped his eyes and said modestly, "I'm afeard how I'd make out. Can't ever'body be as mighty a man as you."

There were times when Tommy didn't know exactly how to take Abe, and now he looked at Abe suspiciously.

Without cracking a smile, Abe inquired, "How's yore Adam's apple comin along?"

Everybody knew that a boy became a man when his Adam's apple showed plainly. Abe's juttet out like a shelf.

"If some stranger was to ast me, 'Abe, air you a man yet?' I wouldn't blab for no hour. I'd jest do this." Abe jiggled his Adam's apple up and down.

Tommy swallowed hard again and again, trying to make an Adam's apple appear in his neck, but try as hard as he would, he couldn't manage it; he just didn't have an Adam's apple. He started to get mad at Abe and got red in the face, but then changed his mind and laughed good-naturedly. The boys got up from the grass, slapped each other's backs, and said good-bye.

Abe returned to the oak tree at a gallop. Maybe he was still too early, but maybe there would be a note for him. If there was, what would it say? He was afraid to reach into the hole, and hesitated. When he did reach in, his fingers found a folded piece of paper and under it, a sack.

Before he unfolded the note he looked all around to see if anyone was coming. Nothing was moving on the landscape, except for an old dog trotting across a field, and so with trembling fingers Abe unfolded the paper.

DEAR ABE:

I have a zither and can play Three Blind Mice on it. I am learning some church tunes.

You better not come to see me this Sunday because Willis will be here.

Look in the sack for a little present for you.

Yours sincerely a friend,

BETTY INGRAM

In the sack Abe found some cookies, two apples, and three turnips.

The note was a hard blow, all right. But the cookies and apples and turnips—didn't they mean that she liked him a little? As he rode slowly homeward, he ate one of the apples and then one of the turnips. He wouldn't have dreamed of peeling them, for the skin was the part Betty's hands had touched.

There was no denying that in the race for Betty's affections, Willis was way out in front. But Abe was determined to stay in the running.

"I see where I better git busy an git me some cash money," he thought. "By thunder, I'll git her a present that'll make old Willis an his zither look piddlin."

As soon as he got home, he went straight to his father, out in the field.

"Pa, you reckon you could git along withouten me for a spell?"

"You wanta go off somewheres, son?"

"Well, I gotta git me some cash. Iffen I went over to Rockport, I could likely git a job on the river."

Tom thought he could make a pretty good guess at why all of a sudden the boy wanted cash.

"No need to go off, son. They's a plenty of carpenter work to do right around here. You could work with me an Dennis."

That was fine with Abe, and so he and his pa started right in to make their plans for the coming season.

Abe decided not to allow himself to get too downhearted. "Maybe next week sometime," he told himself, "they be'll another note in the tree, a-sayin 'Come on over.'"

*N*O NOTE WAS LEFT IN THE tree for Abe the next week, or the next, or the next. He worked hard, and tried to keep his courage up. But after half a dozen fruitless trips to the oak tree, he began to lose heart. When he ran into Betty in Brown's store, her manner was friendly but casual. It was then he began to wonder if he'd ever really had a chance with her. Anyway, it was plain enough now that Willis Youngblood had cut him out completely.

"Reckon I might as well face up to hit. That's what you'd say, hain't hit, Ma?" He settled himself on the fallen log beside his mother's grave and whittled as he mused.

"Hit's a hard thing, though, to give up the idea of me ever gittin her. All the time I been helpin on the cabin for Dennis an Elizabeth, I been a-thinkin how purty soon Pa an Dennis might be helpin to build a cabin for Betty an me. I still lie awake nights a-thinkin how nice hit'd be to come home in the evenin an see her in the doorway, a-holdin out her arms for me. Even though they hain't no use in hit,

sometimes I forgit an start in agin to figger how I'd git the money to build her a real house.

"You know, Ma, they's gittin to be lotsa houses 'round here now. Not cabins—I mean real houses, with sidin. Pa an Dennis an me have got the job of builidin one this summer, over near the Station. Iffen you was still here with us, Ma, I'd shore see to hit you didn't allus hafta live in no cabin. I'd build you a fine house with a upstairs to hit—we wouldn't call hit the loft, cause they'd be real steps goin up. I'd make you a nice porch to set on, an I'd buy you a carpet for the best room. An wouldn't let you work so hard, the way you useta. I'd make up to you somehow for all the hard times you had.

"When I had you, Ma, I didn't know how well off I was; didn't have the sense. Now I remember lotsa things. I kin remember you a-singin to me, all them old tunes. When I think about hit, seems like I'm little agin, a-settin in yore lap. I kin see the firelight a-flickerin, an hear yore purty voice.

"You remember that time I skeered you near to death? You'd told Pa to fix the well curb, but he kep a-saying he'd do hit tomorrer; you know how he puts things off. You sent me to git some water, an that time, jest for fun, I hunkered down behind the curb an hollered, 'Help!' You was makin soap that day, an when I hollered, you come a-runnin so fast you kicked over the bucket an spilled the lye all over ever'thing. You was white in the face, an you was a-prayin, 'O God, don't let him drown!'

"I remember you hollered to Sarah to git the long pole that was leanin against the house. Then you told her to run out in the field an call Pa. Well, I knowed better'n to let you git Pa, cause he'd of give me the whalin of my life. So I raised up, laughin.

"Honest, Ma, I didn't think how skeered you'd be. I didn't know till you bust out a-cryin. You hadda go in the

house an set down. I'm sorry I done hit, Ma, but I like to remember how you loved me that much. I'll never forgit that time.

"Them was the happy days, Ma. Wished I'd knowed hit then. But when you air little, you air allus a-lookin forwards to somethin better than what you got. Things don't allus turn out that way, though. Funny how when you air little, you can't wait to git big, an then when you git big, a lotta times you wish you was little again."

Abe sighed profoundly as he rose to go down the hill. "Reckon all a feller kin do is make the best of things the way they come along."

The melancholy which Abe felt in those moments beside the grave was constantly with him nowadays. There were times when his spirits revived a little, through his interest in books, or in flowers and birds and butterflies. Some days he even felt lucky; at such times his mind seemed to float like a great white cloud drifting in the summer sky. Most of the time, though, he felt as if there were a haze between him and all the other people in the world. Losing Betty had undermined his self-confidence so much that his stepmother said to him, "That boy acks like he thinks he oughta apologize to ever'body jest for livin."

Now and then he still went to Loafer Station to hear the gossip, for though he was only torturing himself, he still liked to keep tabs on Betty. One day the talk was mostly about the big camp meeting which would be held soon in a nearby grove.

"They'll be two preachers, so's they kin help each other," said Old Man Brown. "One of 'em'll be the Rever'nd Spradlin. Now, there's a man that kin shore make the sinners hit the sawdust trail."

Bill Shucks burst out laughing. "I remember the last time the Rever'nd Spradlin held a camp meetin here. One day he announced the subject of his sermon would be faith. But

I took notice he passed the pan for the collection afore he preached the sermon."

"That's nothin," said Hez Evarts. "Onst over to Ravin Tad the preacher took up the collection first an then never preached no sermon a-tall. They say when he seen all that cash money in the pan, he jest keeled right over."

"Is that a fack?" said Old Man Brown. "Well, at this here camp meetin we'll jest wait till the preachin's over afore we pass the pan around."

As Abe joined in the general laughter, he heard a familiar voice beside him.

"Howdy, Abe."

"Well, howdy, Polly."

Polly was a pleasant-looking girl, and Abe remembered that once he had liked her pretty well. Yet as they talked, asking after each other's families, the haze which he sensed between them thickened; Polly's face faded in a mist, and he saw Betty instead.

Polly was explaining that though usually the Tooleys traded in Gentryville, which was nearer to them than Loafer Station was, the last time she'd been at the Gentryville store, they'd been out of soda.

"I shore got a passel of stuff to carry home now, hain't I?"

Abe, always good-natured, promptly took the hint. "I'll carry yore bundles for you, Polly."

It was pleasant, walking with Polly where the sunlight lay in yellow patches on the lane.

"Hold on," said Abe. "No need to hurry past these cedar trees. I think a dark green cedar is the purtiest tree they is, don't you?"

Polly didn't agree; she couldn't decide between poplars and birches for the prettiest trees. Then they saw a hummingbird hovering over a trumpet vine.

"I've watched hummingbirds a lot," Abe told her. "Hit's

a funny thing. You know, the he-bird'll work like the devil helpin his mate to build the nest an git hit ready, but jest as soon as she lays her first egg, then he won't come near the nest no more."

"Jest like some of the men," said Polly. "Hit makes me so dang mad when I hear some things. A man is all sweetness as long as he's a-courtin, but sometimes as soon as the gal starts in to have a young'un, the feller flies the coop."

Abe blushed furiously and hastily changed the subject to the camp meeting. Polly, like everyone else, was eager for this event, which would provide a brief interlude of excitement in the yearly round of country life. Seeing her suddenly become prettier as her face lit up with anticipation, Abe decided to take his own advice about making the best of things as they came along.

"How'd you like to go to the camp meetin with me one day?"

"Well, I'll ast Ma when we git home," she assented.

Mrs. Tooley had been stirring a batch of soap in the big iron kettle out in the yard, and her round, jovial face was red when she looked up.

"Well, howdy, Abe. Glad to see you. I been a-wonderin what was keepin Polly. Iffen I hain't got a pone of bread ready when Pa comes to the house for supper, he'll be outa humor, an I shore can't make bread withouten a pinch of soda."

Abe and Polly followed her into the house.

"You'll set down to supper with us, won't you, Abe?" said Mrs. Tooley. "How's yore pa an his wife? I hain't seen 'em in a coon's age. This here is a terrible long spell of dry weather, hain't hit?"

She rattled on breathlessly without waiting for answers to her questions. Abe saw that he wasn't going to get much chance to talk to Polly on this visit.

"You believe in witches, Abe?" was the next question. "I dunno that I do. Uncle Amos Tooley, he's been ailin a long time now, an old Nervy Hart, she told him likely he was bewitched. 'I bet iffen you open up yore piller,' she says, 'you'll find a wreath of feathers that's almost complete. Iffen you do, you better burn hit up quick, afore hit's finished. Even iffen hit needs jest one more feather to finish the wreath, you kin still save yore life by chuckin the whole thing in the far. But you got to do hit quick; else you might tumble over right where you air a-standin. 'Cause onst the wreath is finished, then the witch has got you an you air a gone goose; won't be no doctor that kin help you.'

"Well, that skeered pore Uncle Amos so bad, he began to git short breaths. But Aunt Becky, she don't believe in such truck, an she warn't a-gonna let him burn up her good pillers, that she'd made with feathers she'd plucked offen her own geese."

By now Mrs. Tooley had her batter mixed. She poured it in the spider, which she set on a bed of embers on the hearth. Then she put the cover on the spider and heaped embers over it.

"Account of Aunt Becky, Uncle Amos, he sent for Pa an me to come help him. Said to hurry; he was feelin awful bad. Pa kinda believed hit about the witch, so we went over.

"'Look at them nice pillers,' says Aunt Becky, 'an this dang old idiot wants to burn 'em up! But I says, 'Well, he might as well be bewitched as skeered to death.' So she says all right. 'But they's no need to burn 'em both,' she says, 'jest the one you sleep on, Amos.'

"'How do I know I allus git the same piller on my side of the bed?' he says. 'No sir, no use to burn her jest half up. Then t'other half would come back in a all-fired fury, an I wouldn't last no longer'n a June bug when a passel of turkeys comes along. By God, hit's both or none.' He talked like the

witch herself was the same as in the pillers, but for all I know, that might be right.

"Well, Aunt Becky balked agin. Then I says, 'Let him burn the feathers, Aunt Becky. But iffen I was you, I'd put my foot down on him a-burnin the ticks. You kin allus save up more feathers, but them ticks cost money.' So that way she give in.

"Well, Pa an Uncle Amos set down by the far with the pillers in their laps an begun to feel em over. Pa says, 'Looka here, Uncle Amos. Here's a wreath, all right. Feels like hit's purty near finished.'

"'Give her here!' Uncle Amos hollers. He grabbed the piller an taken his knife an ripped the tick open, an we all looked. I've often heard of sech a thing, but this was the first time I ever laid eyes on one.

"'We gotta ask God to take away the witch's power,' Pa says. So he an Uncle Amos done that. They dumped the feathers in the far an then spit in the far. I think that's s'posed to be the same as spittin in the witch's face.

"'That was a close call,' says Uncle Amos, an he set back an sighed. But Pa was a-feelin t'other piller, an he says, 'By jacks, I do believe they's one in here, too.'

"Well, Uncle Amos begun to shake. But that didn't keep him from grabbin the piller. He was so skeered he pitched hit right in the far, tick an all.

"'Now look what you done,' Aunt Becky hollers. 'That was the best tick, too. You old fool, you. I wish now the witch had took you.' She really lit into Uncle Amos, an went on till hit looked like she warn't never gonna let up till the crack of dawn. All this time the feathers a-burnin made a terrible stink.

"Uncle Amos started to git mad too, an by an by he was real mad. 'Iffen I'd of knowed they'd be all this ruckus, by God, I'd of let the witch git me an be done with hit. I'm

gittin tarred of ever'thing. Seems like a man can't have no peace in this world.' He got up an hollered an waved his arms an stomped around the room jest like he'd never had a sick day in his life."

Mrs. Tooley paused for breath, and Abe thought that now Polly would be able to get a word in edgewise to ask if she could go with him to the camp meeting. But before Polly could get her mouth open, her ma had started up again.

"I never did git to thank you, Abe, for takin up for my Freddy in the schoolyard. He come home that time an told me how a bigger boy than him was a-fixin to whale him, but you stepped in an told the big boy he'd hafta lick you first. That was real neighborly of you, Abe."

"Aw, twarn't nothin, ma'am. I jest can't stand to see a big feller a-pickin on a little one, that's all."

"Well, we air beholden to you jest the same." Now she cocked her head and looked him over. "My land, Abe, I do believe you air still a-growin."

"Yessum." He looked down with some embarrassment at his knobby ankles sticking out from the legs of his too-short pants. "My stepma says she couldn't keep up with me iffen she did nothin but sewin night an day. The way hit is, the gals hafta do all their own sewin. My stepma makes a sight more clothes for me than for Pa, an pore Johnny jest hasta wear anything that'll keep his hide from stickin out. Reckon purty soon she'll turn up these here pants for him."

"I know jest how hit is," said Mrs. Tooley. "When I was a gal, I allus hadda wear hand-me-downs, an hit's the same with my Annie. She's allus glad to see Polly git a purty dress, cause Annie knows she'll git hit soon's Polly's growed outen hit."

Now at last Polly got her chance and asked if she might go to the camp meeting with Abe.

"Iffen hit was ary other boy around here, likely I'd say no," her ma answered, "but with Abe I reckon hit'll be all right."

Supper was on the table now, and Abe was urged to stay, but he excused himself, saying he'd be needed at home for the night work.

As soon as his lanky legs had taken him out of sight, Polly remarked to her ma, "Abe's all right, I guess. He treats a person nice, an you never need to be afeard of bein alone with him after dark. But why did he hafta be born so ugly? God shore didn't do him a good deed there." She sighed. "I wished hit was Herbie Kitchen that had ast me. But he goes with Minnie Cisney."

"You wanta watch out fer these good-lookin fellers," her ma told her. "The way I figger hit, iffen a man's too good-lookin, his woman would hafta be skeered of him a-runnin off with some other woman. You know, that's happened more'n once right around here. An iffen he didn't run off, he'd anyways have woods colts a-runnin all over. You got to remember purty is as purty does. That Abe's a real nice boy."

"Yessum, but he's ugly as homemade sin."

"You better treat him right. Likely he's heard about you sackin Ned Calvert, an iffen you hain't keerful, Abe might hold off, a-figgerin you might sack him, too."

"Likely I will. But a gal can't set home by herself all the time. Reckon I'll jest hafta stand Abe till some better-lookin feller comes along."

*I*SAAC HAD ALL THE GARRISON boys chopping down trees and sawing them up. "Too much woods and not enough ground to plow," he said, "for all the mouths we gotta feed. The bigger you boys git, the more you eat. We gotta hurry an git this clearin done while the weather's good, so's we kin raise a bigger crop next year."

With so much work to do, Tommy hadn't been able to see his girl for more than a week. "Likely she thinks I fell in the well," he thought. One evening he just decided to cut loose and go. While he was combing his hair, he saw Joe regarding him sourly. Joe had used to go see the Widow occasionally, but now that Tommy was going with Martha, Joe felt he ought to stay away, and was resentful. Reading Joe's mind, Tommy grinned maliciously.

He stayed out later than he should have that night, and so the next morning he was the last one down the pegs. He felt dog-tired and looked the way he felt.

"Tommy, hain't you feelin good?" his ma asked anxiously.

"He's sick 'cause they's so much work to do," said Joe,

"but iffen he could go to Loafer Station today, he'd be able."

"From now on," Isaac said, "I want you boys to kill ever varmint you lay eyes on. The foxes has got so many of our chickens, we got nary a egg to eat this morning, an hardly a old hen left to stew. As for garden truck, looks like we been raisin hit jest for the rabbits. We better git a couple more dogs to keep the rabbits down."

"Isaac, a dog eats about as much cornbread as a boy," Melinda reminded him.

"Hit's this here drouth that's a-killin us," he said.

In the clearing Johnny shirked, at the same time complaining loudly that the others were letting him do all the work. Isaac got tired of it after a while and threatened to cut a hickory switch. Then Tommy challenged Johnny. "You come over here an work with me, an we'll see who quits first."

That evening in the yard Johnny was bragging about all he'd done that day.

"Well, you didn't do so bad for a little runt," Tommy conceded.

Johnny flared up. "Who you callin a runt?" He grabbed up a piece of firewood from the pile and chucked it at his older brother. Tommy ducked, and then the chase was on. Eventually Tommy cornered Johnny and gave him a pummeling that the little fellow would be a long time forgetting.

"I'll git even with you," Johnny howled, grabbing another chunk of firewood.

"You'll do no sech thing," his ma said sharply, speaking from the doorway. "You march right in here now, young man."

At supper she complained to Isaac. "Folks air allus astin me how we tell them twins apart. Even I can't allus do hit by their looks, but mostly you kin tell easy enough by what

they air a-doin. Johnny's allus up to some kinda meanness. Now, Willie here—twarn't for him, I dunno what I'd do for farwood. Johnny don't keer iffen I got wood or not, but I take notice when hit's eatin time, he's allus got his feet under the table fust."

Willie looked smug, while Johnny scowled glumly. Shaking her head sadly, Melinda turned to Johnny. "Why can't you be a good boy like yore brother?"

"Ifen I was, you'd put ever'thing on me anyways. I hain't a-gonna leave nobody run over me."

Nobody had taken the time to do any hunting lately, and so there was only pickled pork for supper, and not too much of that. Johnny eyed his plate with distaste.

"I got nothin but bone here," he complained, tapping the bone with his fork to get attention. He raised himself from the bench and peered around the table, inspecting each plate suspiciously to see if Melinda had given anyone else a better piece than his. While he was doing this, Willie, still looking smug, calmly stole a slice of fried pumpkin pie from Johnny's plate.

Tommy had observed this by-play. "I'm gittin tarred of this complainin," he said. "Tomorrer mornin, by God, I'm a-goin out an shoot the biggest wild turkey in the woods. I wanta fill them twins up jest onst, iffen hit kin be done."

"Hain't you a-comin to camp meetin with the rest of us?" Melinda asked, looking at Tommy in surprise. This day at camp meeting had been planned for quite some time.

"I'd ruther work tomorrer an go the next day," Tommy answered. "Promised to take my gal."

His ma and pa looked displeased, but decided not to say anything.

After supper the twins began quarreling over the turkey which Tommy was going to kill. It was understood that Tommy would be entitled to one drumstick for getting the

turkey, and each twin was determined to be the one who got the other drumstick.

"Ma's mad at you," Willie taunted Johnny. "You won't git nothin but a old wing."

Their pa was thinking, trying to figure out a trade he wanted to make. As was his habit, he was straddling his chair, resting his arms on the back of it and musing with his eyes half closed. Suddenly he straightened up and said, "These young'uns air enough to drive a person crazy. I can't keep my mind on nothin for them devilish twins an their dang bickerin. For the love of God, whyn't you two git on up to bed?"

The tone of his voice told the twins that they'd better quiet down or else, and so for a while they were silent. Sitting behind Isaac's back, they amused themselves by making faces at each other. One twin would make a face and then look away quickly so as not to see the face the other would make in reply. But pretty soon the first twin would be overcome by curiosity and would look around to find his brother staring at him, waiting patiently with features already puckered up and tongue ready to pop out.

Isaac found that he still couldn't concentrate. It was so unusual for the twins to behave themselves that the strange quiet made their father uneasy.

"What you rascals up to now?" he inquired, turning around.

"Pa," Willie wailed, "Johnny's makin faces at me."

"Well, git to bed, the both of you, or I'll make a face at yore backside in a minute." As the boys were scrambling up to the loft, he announced, "No more twins for me. I'd ruther have my troubles come one at a time. Next time the midwife comes to me an says hit's twins, by God, I'm a-gonna take to the woods."

The next day, after an early dinner, everyone but Tommy

got all dressed up and climbed into the wagon. As the family drove through Loafer Station, Isaac remarked, "Not much life around here today. Reckon ever'body's at the meetin'."

The campground looked as if the population of half the state had gathered there. The people who had come from a distance were living in tents, in and under wagons, or in improvised shelters of poles and brush, and these individual camps under the trees completely surrounded the canvas-roofed shelter where the services were held. Now the local folks were arriving on foot, on horseback, or in wagons.

"Lord only knows where we kin tie up," said Isaac. "Looks like they's hosses an oxens tied to ever saplin'."

When he found a place at last, everyone got down from the wagon. As Isaac helped Melinda over a fallen log, she said, "This here shore is a wilderness to hold a meetin in."

The children were all wide-eyed. "My! Sech a sight of people!" piped little Lyddy. Dogs and stray hogs were underfoot everywhere in the crowd.

Soon most of the people were settled on the benches in the clearing. The Reverend Spradling led the singing of the doxology, and then a hymn.

Sinners, turn. Why will you die?
 God your Maker asks you why.
 God, Who you your being gives,
 Made you with Himself to live.

"Looks like the devil's a-gittin stronger ever day in this here region," the preacher shouted. "Why, the country's full of woods colts. You men that are bein untrue to yore wife as well as yore God—you call yourself Christians? And another thing: You think God don't see you when you go into the saloon?" Striding up and down his platform, he spoke

forcefully and at some length about the prevalence of sin in southern Indiana. "You sinners air a-headin straight for hell an damnation. They'll shore be a plenty of weepin an wailin on the Judgment Day."

Groans of "Amen" and "Save us, Lord," came from the audience. Now the Reverend changed his tone, speaking rapturously of God's mercy. Tears flowed down his face as he held out his arms and begged the unsaved to come forward and give their hearts to God. "Jesus says, 'Come all ye who air weary an heavy-laden, an I will give you rest.'"

Most of the listeners were deeply stirred. One by one, sinners rose and went forward to the mourners' bench, where they knelt and called out to the Lord to have mercy on their souls. The Christians prayed aloud for the sinners.

"Things is gittin real lively," Jack whispered to the twins.

Shouts of "Glory, hallelujah!" rose from Christians in the audience and then from sinners who felt themselves being born again. Now many people were standing with their arms raised to the sky, and one woman was spinning around and around like a top. Old Andy Nelson, wrestling with the devil, lay down and rolled around in the straw which carpeted the ground before the pulpit.

Now Mandy Sarrell rose from the mourners' bench, shrieked, and fell down unconscious. The Reverend called attention to the example of this sister who had fallen under the power of the spirit.

Many were saved that afternoon. After the service the worshippers scattered through the grove, the campers to build their fires and cook their suppers, and the others to visit with their friends. Melinda told the Garrison children to gather at the wagon in about half an hour for their picnic supper.

Soon no one was left in the pavilion except Mandy, still unconscious on the straw, and the twins, who lingered to

watch her. A woman who happened to be passing by paused and said, "Lawsy me, she can't lay there on the ground with all them hogs around. Wonder where her folks air at." She thought a moment and asked, "You two boys, will you set an watch her till she comes to? I got to git my supper cookin."

The twins were proud of their responsibility, but since everyone was busy elsewhere and no one paid them any attention, and since Mandy did nothing but lie there like a log, they soon got bored. The smell of cooking from the campfires sharpened their urge to get away and get back to the wagon.

"Maybe she'd come to iffen we tickled her," Willie suggested. He searched on the ground and soon found a fine, big feather from some rooster's tail. Cautiously he tickled Mandy's neck and ears, but not a muscle in her responded.

"Here, lemme try," said Johnny. He plucked a straw and dragged its rough tip over her face. Then he poked it in her ear. Still she didn't move.

"We can't go off an leave her, or the hogs might come an eat on her," said Willie.

"That's right. She's a kinda little woman; one of them big hogs could drag her right off into them bushes. I wish somebody else would come along."

"She shore acts like she's dead."

Johnny, the brash one, flipped her nose and lip with his finger, then twisted her ear. When even that didn't bring her to, he said in a tone of awe, "Maybe she is dead."

Gradually the conviction grew in the minds of both boys that Mandy had died and that they had been left to sit with a corpse. In the deceptive shadows of early twilight, the still form took on a spooky appearance.

"I shore hope her ghost hain't walkin around here," said Willie.

"Let's git the hell outen here," said Johnny.

"But s'posin the hogs come?"

"They can't hurt her none when she's dead."

Walking fast and close together, the twins hurried to the wagon.

Melinda noticed how quiet they were while they ate their supper. "Them boys ack like they was in conviction," she said to Isaac. "I do pray they give their hearts to God."

But it was not religion that the twins were thinking of. Neither of them felt right about having left Mandy Sarrell lying dead, and now both were haunted by thoughts of the hogs tearing at her body in the bushes.

As they filed up the aisle behind their parents for the evening service, they exchanged many guilty glances, and the Reverend Rundell's sermon got little of their attention. They didn't perk up even for the singing of a particularly cheerful hymn.

Yander comes my mother
On bright wings of glory.
Listen how she's shoutin.
Oh, what a happy time!

The song continued with "Yander comes my father," then went on, stanza by stanza, through grandparents, aunts and uncles, and sisters and brothers. It was when the congregation had got around to cousins that the twins looked toward the amen corner and spotted Mandy Sarrell, who was standing up now, singing lustily with the best of them. Both twins suppressed giggles of relief, and then both scowled, feeling that Mandy had betrayed them by making fools of them.

"Iffen she falls under the power agin tonight, I shore hain't a-gonna set with her," Willy whispered.

"Me neither."

Now the Reverend Rundell was making a special plea to the young people to come to Christ. Jack, Betsy, and Lyddy were considered too young, but Melinda and Isaac sent questioning glances at the other children. Eunie rose and marched gravely down the aisle.

The twins both craved the importance given to sinners who went forward to be saved, but now they dreaded the experience of being born again. When Joe got up, Melinda, seeing the twins still rooted to the bench, told them to watch over little Lyddy. Then she and Isaac followed Joe and Eunie and knelt to pray with them.

Many Christians had come forward to pray with the sinners, and the preacher worked his way from one group to the next. Each time a sinner stood up and proclaimed himself saved, a great shouting went up. At last all the mourners were on their feet shouting, except for Joe. But now the hour was so late that the Reverend felt obliged to bring the service to a close. After urging the worshippers to keep up the practice of family prayers, he called for the final hymn.

At home that night, the family gathered around Joe to pray for him.

"Son, how come you couldn't come through tonight?" Isaac asked.

Joe hesitated in embarrassment, then leaned forward pointing to the top of his head. "You see that there bald spot? Well, all the time I was bent over, a-tryin to pray, I jest couldn't git my mind offen hit. Seemed like ever'body would be lookin at my bald spot an laughin."

"Land's sake!" Melinda exclaimed. "Shucks, son, I'll give you some goose grease to put on it. That'll make hit grow back."

Isaac led a prayer, asking the Lord to deliver Joe from the sin of pride.

Next day the twins managed to sneak off from the work

in the clearing for a ramble in the woods. Sitting on a log, they talked over all the events of the camp meeting.

"I wish now I'd got saved, 'steada havin to wait for next year," said Johnny.

"Me too. But I've heard a person can git saved all by theirsself, iffen they pray hard enough."

Taking turns, the twins began to pray loudly, using all the high-flown language they'd heard the day before.

"Hey, hold on," said Willie. "Maybe we better not pray out here in the woods. S'posin we was to fall under the power?"

"That's right," said Johnny, and both promptly started toward the house.

"We kin pray up in the loft sometime," Johnny suggested, "where Ma'll be handy to take keer of us."

*A*BE WAS ALL DRESSED UP in his Sunday best when he rode up to Polly's house, but when she caught sight of him she remarked, "Hit don't make no difference what he wears; hit don't help him none."

"Bring your hoss over here, Abe," she called to him, and when he obeyed, she explained, "Pa drug this here stump over by the doorstep for the very purpose so's the women-folks could git on a hoss." From the stump she could easily jump onto the horse behind Abe.

"Take good keer of her, young man," Mrs. Tooley said from the doorway, "an bring her home early. An mind you keep an eye peeled iffen that Tommy Garrison's around. The tales I've heard about that boy, I wouldn't want one of my gals within a mile of him."

"Yessum," Abe replied dutifully, and he and Polly waved good-bye.

The way was pleasant, and he allowed the horse to amble. They were still some distance from the campground when Polly said, "We better hurry. The service has already started; I kin hear the singin."

"Hit sounds nice, don't hit?" The music, mellowed by distance, stirred Abe's emotions. "Funny what music does to a person," he mused aloud. "When you hear a march, yore pulse beats faster, an a love ballad makes you kinda breathe a sigh." The grave measures of the hymn which they were hearing gave him an exalted feeling. He felt as if a doorway had been opened for him, a doorway leading to some mysterious region of the spirit. Through this doorway he seemed to see broad skies stretching to unknown horizons, vast plains waiting to be explored.

Now they had come near enough to hear the words.

When I can read my titles clear
To mansions in the skies,
I'll bid farewell to earthly cares
And wipe my weeping eyes.

A couple of good voices among the singers were harmonizing, and Abe let the horse walk even more slowly, so that he could soak in the rich sounds.

"Yes, music heals the spirit," he thought. The hymn soothed his troubled heart. With its harmonies rather than its words it seemed to be reassuring him that God was watching over him, and that everything that happened to him was part of some great plan.

"Howdy, Abe."

Tommy's greeting brought Abe back down to earth. The singing had ceased just as Abe and Polly had reached the outskirts of the campground.

"Polly, yore purty face is shore a sight for sore eyes," said Tommy.

"Go along, Tommy Garrison," she answered, pretending that she was not pleased by the compliment. "I bet you flirt with ever gal you see."

"Well, the fact is, I love 'em all."

Abe laughed. "Sounds like Tommy's been up to the mourners' bench an got saved, him lovin ever'body that-away."

"Nope, I never went up. I'm jest full of nachel goodness, like a pear is full of juice. Here, Polly, lemme help you down."

He grasped her waist to lift her down from the horse; then, in releasing her, he artfully let his hands slide down over her hips to stroke her thighs. Polly turned as red as a strawberry.

"Tommy Garrison, you hain't never helpin me offen no hoss agin!"

Tommy laughed as she flounced away from him.

"Hain't you a-comin to the meetin?" Abe asked him.

"Oh, I'll drift along direckly."

With Polly on his arm, Abe joined the latecomers straggling into the pavilion. He was pleased to see people looking their way, and to hear one woman say to another, "Looks like Abe Lincoln's got hisself a gal."

Soon Tommy came strolling in to take his place beside Martha on a bench. A minute later, when Polly nudged him, Abe turned to see Betty and Willis coming up the aisle. It was a painful sight, and for a moment Abe hid his face in his hands, as if he were praying.

Tommy, too, saw Betty, and noticed Willis's proprietary arm around her shoulders. From that moment on, Tommy made no pretense of listening to the sermon. From where he sat he could see the back of Willis's head and Betty's face almost in profile, and all through the service his eyes kept returning to her. He looked at Martha beside him, noticing that she looked especially pretty today, but then his mind wandered back to Betty. When he pictured Willis putting his arms around her, Tommy got hot all over.

Abe at first had to force himself to concentrate on the sermon, but his interest was aroused when the preacher spoke of God's great love for mankind. The exalted feeling returned to Abe as he joined in singing, "Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly. . . ." When the plea came for the unsaved to come forward and pledge themselves to Christ, Abe was on the point of getting to his feet to answer the summons. But then the Reverend Spradling began to hold forth on hellfire and damnation.

"You sinners better git down on yore knees and repent yore wicked ways. You'uns better humble yoreself an pray God for deliverance from the flames. 'Cause you'uns know whoever dies in sin is a lost sôul, condemned to eternal punishment in the far. Think of it, brethern an sistern. Repent, else you'uns'll be throwed into the Pit to burn, not jest for a while, but forever an ever." The Reverend continued in this vein until his listeners could see the flames and smell the brimstone.

Abe settled back on the bench, losing interest. He amused himself by watching Mandy Sarrell, who was running up and down the aisle, shouting, "Glory to God in the highest! Glory!" Her hair fell down and flapped behind her as she ran.

Now some of the more earnest Christians were circulating among the benches, exhorting the unsaved. Old Andy Nelson came up to Abe and took him by the hand.

"Son, whyn't you git saved? You don't wanta burn in Hell, do you?"

Abe got a stubborn look. "I hain't afeard of Hell."

Old Andy was shocked beyond speech. He stood pop-eyed while Abe explained, "I don't believe our Heavenly Father would condemn any of His childern to eternal torment."

Old Andy departed, shaking his head sadly. Immedi-

ately after the service, though, he sought out Abe and Polly, and this time he had the Reverend Spradling in tow.

"Young man," said the Reverend, "I'm told you deny the existence of Hell, though I can't hardly believe sech a thing. Why, that amounts to denying the existence of God Almighty."

A little knot of people had gathered around to listen.

Abe stood his ground. "Nope, I for one don't believe in no burnin Hell."

"How kin you say that?" said the Reverend. "Don't you believe in the Holy Bible?"

"Shore I do. But let's see now who's been a-readin the Bible an who hain't."

Abe turned to address himself to the group of listeners rather than to the preacher. Now the boy showed no lack of self-confidence, for this was a subject on which he had done a lot of thinking and on which he had deep-rooted convictions. His eyes glowed, and he spoke as boldly as if he were a preacher himself.

"You'uns open yore Bible an turn to the Book of Job, Chapter Fourteen, an you'uns'll see where Job says, 'O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave . . .' Now, we know the Old Testament was wrote in the Hebrew language. Job asked the Lord to hide him in *Sheol*. *Sheol*, that's the Hebrew word for grave. An 'Hell' comes from the very same word. Hell is the same as the grave.

"So Hell hain't no burnin far; hit's jest a hidin place. You'uns have heard folks say they'd 'helled' their taters, meanin they'd buried 'em in a pit. That's what Job was a-prayin for. He was astin for rest, not to be burned in no far.

"I know they's good men a-preachin this doctrine of eternal torment, a-thinkin they air a-doin God's work. But the way I read the Bible, that hain't what hit teaches us

a-tall. I believe this talk about a burnin Hell is pure blasphemy, that jest clouds the truth an dishonors God an hardens sinners in their evil ways. When these here hellfire preachers wake up on the Day of Resurrection an learn somethin about God's love an mercy, they'll shore hafta cover their faces in shame."

When Abe had finished, he suddenly felt tired. Taking Polly by the arm, he walked away, leaving the Reverend and his backers to rumble dire predictions about Abe's future in this world and the next.

Polly looked up with a worried expression. "Abe, I'm afeard you'll lose yore heavenly home. Jest the same, I like the way you stuck up for what you thunk was right."

Abe patted her arm gratefully. Then, since he was not feeling sociable, he excused himself, promising to join her later, and sent her off by herself to visit at the campfires.

At about that time Tommy was doing the same thing with Martha.

"You been powerful quiet today, Tommy," she said. "Air you mad at me?"

"Aw, iffen a person hain't talkin ever minute, you think he's mad or somethin." Tommy had the feeling of being trapped; he just had to go off by himself for a while. "You git along with yore gossipin. I got a little bus'ness to tend to."

His business consisted of wandering aimlessly under the trees. Not exactly thinking—actually he was trying not to think. Abe, too, was wandering, looking at the ground. The two almost cracked their heads together before they saw each other.

"What's ailin you, Tom?"

"Nothin. What's ailin you?"

Abe told about the ruckus he'd got into about Hell. "You know, they looked at me like I was some kinda varmint."

"Pay 'em no mind," said Tommy. "You know, I don't hold with a lotta things that goes on here, like them numb-skulls a-rollin in the straw. The whole damn country turns out, though. Reason I come is to see the show."

At about that time Willis and Betty strolled by, hand in hand. Tommy thought then of all the times he'd walked with Betty like that. He remembered how they'd talked about getting married, about the kind of furniture they wanted and how many babies they'd have. Probably at that very moment Willis was saying the same love words that Tommy had used.

"Wonder how she kin stand that son-of-a-bitch," said Tommy. "I've a mind to go after 'em an beat the hind sights offen him."

Abe knew just how Tommy felt. How often Abe had wished that Willis would go somewhere so far off that he'd never find his way back! Yet Abe felt obliged to defend Betty against injustice.

"What's the matter with you? Hain't Betty got the same right as you got to do like she pleases? You air a-goin with Martha, hain't you? Well, you can't expeck a gal to set home an pine her life away while you go a-flyin round with some other gal. Leastways, not Betty. Looks like she hain't the pinin kind."

"Reckon I can't blame her much for bein mad at me," Tommy conceded. "Martha's not so high-tempered as Betty, thank goodness. She's purty, too, an she loves me. Hit's a funny thing, though: Seems like you keer more for the gal that's hard to git than for the one you know you got."

For a while the boys were silent, both thinking of Betty. Then Tommy said, "She useta like me a right smart. I bet iffen I tried, I could beat old Willis's time."

Abe's heart bled when he thought of Betty with anyone but himself. He knew, though, that he didn't have a chance

with her, and that Tommy did. As things stood, Abe felt that the most wonderful girl in the world was going to waste.

"Then why'n't you try? You'll be a dang fool iffen you don't."

"I dunno."

"You numbskull, you can't make up yore mind what you want, 'cause you want ever'thing at onst. You better watch out you don't end up with nothin'."

"What I want right now is a little nip. Must be more'n one feller here has a jug hid out in the bushes. Or iffen I kin find Old Josh, he'll likely have a pint in his pocket. They's nothin like a snort of red-eye when you got the mullygrubs."

"Well, I better look for Polly," Abe said. "Reckon she's visited all the camps by now."

"I was figgerin you'd forgot me," she said when he found her. "We better go. Ma won't let me stay at night."

As they rode homeward Abe thought of the time when he had ridden along this lane with Betty behind him, and he remembered how he had galloped the horse to make her hold him tight. "Purty near rode pore old Barney to death that time," he thought, and grinned.

He decided to try the same trick on Polly, and whipped up the horse. As her arms tightened around him, Polly thought, "A good thing I can't see his homely face now, or I couldn't hold him like this. Then likely I'd fall off an break a leg."

Abe found it was a pleasant feeling to have Polly hug him—but merely pleasant. The thrill he had got when Betty had done that was missing.

Dusk had fallen when they reached Polly's dooryard. As they stood saying good-night, Abe asked, chiefly to see if she'd do it, "Kiss me good-night?"

Polly's answer was a flirtatious smile. After all, Abe was

a mighty nice boy; she really wished that she could find him more exciting. And so they kissed. But the kiss was pretty much of a failure. Each of these two young people was trying hard to fall in love with the other, but they weren't getting anywhere with it. Abe was much too smart not to have a pretty good idea of how Polly felt about him.

Abe left, feeling mighty blue. As soon as he got home, he went out to the cow lot to see his calf. He stroked her back and scratched her belly—she loved that—and she licked his fingers.

"N.B.," he said, "sometimes I think you air the only livin' thing that loves me."

Now he trudged up the trail to his mother's grave. He sat on the log in the dim starlight, thinking aloud about the day's experiences. After a while he said, "Ma, Pa says I'll git over missin' you; says hit jest takes time. But hit seems like now I miss you more'n ever. Iffen I could jest see yore face again, even jest for a minute . . ."

Tears came to his eyes, and he brushed them away, feeling ashamed of himself—a big fellow like him. But then he remembered, "Hit says in the Bible, 'Jesus wept.' Iffen Jesus done hit, hit must be all right for a person to weep when they feel like hit." Once he let himself go, he was shaken with great sobs. He knelt by the grave, then lay half across it, stroking the damp earth lovingly, clutching at the grass and leaves. Through his spasm of grief he noticed that the vines and flowering plants which he had once planted on the grave were somewhat stunted; probably the great oaks shaded them too densely.

"This here world is shore a mystery; hit's too much for a pore mortal to figger out. God, why did You take her away? Why couldn't You have took old Andy Johnson instead—a old man that can't git outen the bed, layin' there helpless an in pain, a-prayin' to die. Ma wanted to live, an we needed

her. There was old Andy a-beggin You to take him outen his misery, but he's still a-livin, an Ma's dead. As long as I live, I'll never understand that."

After a few minutes he sat up and took hold of himself. "A course you hain't really dead, Ma; I got to remember that. You air gone somewheres, but only for a while. The Bible promises us immortality, an that means onst you air born, you kin never stop bein. Death is jest movin into another world, an when I go, maybe I kin be with you.

"Sometimes I believe that when a person dies, they jest lay there in their grave a-sleepin. But they'll come a bright new Day—the Bible says hit'll be like early dawn—when you'll wake up. Then I'll have you back, an never hafta lose you agin. We'll all live in Paradise.

"I think that Paradise will be right here on this earth. Hit says in the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.' God put Adam an Eve in a Paradise here, an that's what He meant for the human race. But they made a fool of theirself, an now look what we hafta suffer. Death is the worst thing of all. But the Bible says, when the great Day comes, they'll be no more sickness an pain an no more death. We'll all live in heavenly bliss, with no man bein against another, jest with a good feelin towards all."

Now he brushed together some of last year's oak leaves to make a bed beside the grave. "I jest don't wanta leave here tonight, Ma. I feel like iffen I did, I'd jest dream about bein lost in a dark woods with wild animals a-comin after me."

He stretched out on the leaves. Somewhere a night bird called, and got an answer from its mate. A whippoorwill repeated its little song with idiotic monotony.

Meanwhile Tom and Sally were wondering what had become of Abe.

"You s'pose he's off gallivantin?" Sally asked. "Not that hit might not be a good thing iffen he was. The boy hain't had too much yet, an young folks oughta have some fun."

"I bet he's up at his ma's grave," said Isaac. "I'm worried about that boy. Iffen he don't git his mind off his grievin, he's li'ble to git addled."

Tom decided to go up the hill and have a look. A few minutes later he returned, saying, "He's up there, all right, a-layin on the ground. Looked like he might be sleepin, but somehow I didn't wanta bother him. Iffen he don't come down to the house real soon, though, I'll go git him. He's li'ble to ketch his death of cold."

"Hit's a warm night," Sally said. "Maybe hit's better to let him do like he wants. Here, take this here quilt and put hit over him."

On second thought she decided to go along: Tom, being a mere man, might just dump the quilt carelessly without making sure that the boy was covered properly. Finding Abe sleeping soundly, she tucked the quilt around him tenderly. Silently she and Tom asked God to watch over the boy; then they tiptoed away.

*O*NE AUTUMN DAY, A COUPLE of years later, Abe was working on a house which Tom had undertaken to build. At about mid-afternoon Tommy rode up and said, "I'm on my way over to the Station to see what's goin on. Whyn't you come with me?"

Having started shortly after sunup, Abe had already put in a good day's work, and so he agreed to go along. The boys had just entered the saloon when Frank Barnett came in, obviously bursting with news.

"You'uns all know that young saplin Windy Smith? Well, he's done gone off somewheres—been gone two days now. Never said a word to nobody—jest lit out."

"How'd you hear this?" Jim Ashly asked.

"I was jest over to the Smith place," said Frank, "an there was Hattie Smith a-cryin an carryin on. Lulie Hesson was a-settin with her. Seems day 'fore yestiddy Windy got slicked up an says he's a-goin over to see Lulie, like he allus does on a Sunday. Hattie says, 'Well, don't stay too late,' an he says, 'All right, Ma,' an off he goes, a-whistlin, with his

dog Bouncer a-trottin along behind. That's the last anybody ever seen of him.

"Lulie says she was all dressed up an waitin for him. But Windy never come. She got mad as a wet hen. Swore she'd never speak to him agin."

"Can't blame her," Charley Harper commented. "That's a dirty trick to play a gal."

"Well, today she thought different. Says she decided afore she started never speakin to him, she'd go over to the Smith place an give him a good piece of her mind. That's when she found out he was missin.

"Her an Hattie both figger somethin terrible musta happened to him. Hit's plumb pitiful the way Hattie's takin on. She sets in her rocker a-rockin an a-cryin, an ever now an then she lets out a scream. I tell you fellers, hit won't be no use to go a-huntin over thataway for quite a spell; Hattie screams so loud, hit'll shore skeer the critters outen that part of the woods."

"What you figger coulda happened to him?" Tommy wondered.

"Sounds like he went an got hisself lost," said Jim.

Abe spoke up then. "No, that don't seem likely. Why would he go in the deep woods, where he could git lost? He warn't a-goin huntin; he was s'posed to be a-goin to see his gal, an he shorely knowed the way to her house, all right."

"That boy's old enough to take keer of hisself in the woods," said Frank. "His ma's heard a lotta talk about b'ars, an she's shore a b'ar has killed him. Way I figger hit, though, he jest lit out—maybe went to Rockport."

"Come to think of it," said Jim, "last time I remember Windy bein in here, he was listenin to Tom Lincoln talk about Kentucky, how purty hit was over there an all. Windy said by God, some of these days he was a-goin over there an

see the country. Maybe Sunday he jest taken a notion to go right then an there."

"Take him a good two-three days to walk it," said Charley, dubiously.

Old Josh spat explosively. "Might be he's went to Illinois or Ioway or somewheres. You know how them young snots do these days—allus a-movin on. Don't know a good thing when they got hit."

"Reckon he could of left on account of the Hesson gal?" Baldy Bill suggested. "Might be he got her in trouble."

"Iffen that's the case," said Jim, "I'll tell you one thing for shore: Hiram Hesson'll foller him to the jumpin-off place an shoot him like a dog."

Grunts of agreement sounded all along the bar.

"Wished I could of seen him afore he went off," said Baldy Bill. "I'd of told him to jest give her a little turpentine, an all his troubles would be over. They say turpentine'll knock 'em to kingdom come."

"Well, I reckon now they'll be another dang woods colt a-runnin round here," Moses Lemare complained in a righteous tone.

"Hold on, Mose," Old Josh said sharply. "What call you got to look down yore nose? Hit's only human nature to hunt for greener pastures, an as long as they's humans, they'll be some woods colts runnin 'round. To tell you the truth, I'm one myself, an I hain't ashamed to say hit. Why, iffen my pappy an mammy hadn't done what they done, I wouldn't be here today to give you numbskulls good advice. You know they's some woods colts that growed up to be famous men an women. I'd like to know what'd become of the human race iffen hit warn't for us bastards."

"Hain't we a-gittin ahead of ourself here?" Abe suggested. "We don't know for shore that Windy's gone off nowheres. Might be he had a accident."

"That's right," said Charley. "They's a plenty kin happen to a feller in the woods. He could step in a b'ar trap, or git snakebit, or . . ."

At that moment Si Smith walked into the saloon. "Fellers," he said, "I come to git help to find my boy Windy. Maybe you'uns heard he's missin'."

Everyone expressed sympathy for Si, who was haggard with worry.

"A thing like this is enough to drive a man crazy," he said. "I got no idee what become of the boy, but iffen he's a-layin hurt somewheres, we got to find him. My woman's li'ble to lose her mind."

"Hit's kinda late in the day to do much lookin now," said Baldy Bill.

Undoubtedly some of the men were thinking that Windy probably had lit out and left the county, and that a search would be a waste of time. Si must have felt their reluctance, for now he said quickly, in a loud voice, "The person that finds my boy, I'll give my heifer calf, an she's a dandy."

Several of the fellows looked a lot more interested then. All the men agreed that the thing to do was to start the first thing next morning. They would meet with their dogs at the Smith's house and then spread out and comb the woods.

While the talk was still going strong, Tommy motioned for Abe to follow him outside.

"Abe, I knowed old Windy purty well, an I know he hain't went off nowheres."

"How you figger that?"

"He was too crazy for Lulie to go off an leave her. An I know he didn't git her in trouble an run off, cause hit was her that couldn't make up her mind to git married, not him. Stands to reason he had a accident."

"Reckon you air right."

"They's still two-three hours of daylight left. I bet

Windy's somewheres in the woods, maybe a-hollerin for help an nobody hearin him. I'm a-gonna start lookin right this minute."

Abe didn't have to be persuaded to go along. Riding double on Abe's horse, the boys got to the Smith place in no time. Lulie came out of the ouse to greet them. They could hear Mrs. Smith inside, moaning and praying.

"Don't you worry no more, Lulie," Tommy told her. "Abe an me will find old Windy for you, or know the reason why."

"I'll shore be beholden to you for tryin," she answered, "but I don't rightly know what you kin do this late. Mr. Smith an my brother Coon have already went over ever inch of the way from here to our house."

Now that they thought of it, the boys had no idea as to how to start their search.

"What's that dog a-barkin about over in the woods?" Abe wondered.

"Might be hit's Windy's Bouncer," said Lulie. "When I come over this mornin, Bouncer ran up to me in the lane an barked an jumped all over me, but when I went to pat him, he run off in the woods."

"Say, didn't the dog foller Windy last Sunday?" Tommy asked. "I bet the dog knows where Windy is." He and Abe started running across the fields, calling, "Here, Bouncer. Here, boy."

The big shepherd came bounding to meet them. The dog ran from one to the other, wagging his tail and barking frantically. Then he trotted toward the woods, slowing down now and then to look back at the boys.

"Yep, looks like he wants us to foller him," said Tommy. "Where's Windy, Bounce? Go on, boy, show us where."

The dog ran into the woods, and the boys ran after him. They soon lost sight of him in the underbrush, but they could follow the sound of his bark.

"Reckon Windy was takin a short cut through here to Lulie's," said Abe.

Even traveling at a fast walk when they were not running, the boys couldn't hope to keep up with Bouncer. After a while his barking grew faint in the distance, then faded away altogether.

"Last time I heard him," Tommy said, "seemed like he was over thataway."

"Naw, thataway."

They argued the point without deciding anything, then sat down on a log to rest. The silence of the woods, broken only by an occasional bird call or the distant gobbling of wild turkeys, closed in around them.

"You know," said Tommy, "we could spend a week lookin through all this bresh." Just a little while ago he and Abe had felt sure of success, but now the task of finding Windy looked pretty discouraging.

"Yep," Abe agreed, and added, "I think the daylight's a-startin to go."

"Reckon they's nothin to do but go back, an wait till tomorrer like the rest."

Sighing with disgust, they got up and started back along the way they had come. But they had hardly taken a step when they heard frantic barking, getting louder every second. Bouncer came leaping toward them. When he was still some yards away he stopped, yapped at them impatiently, then turned and started off again, this time at a dignified trot. He kept looking back as if to say, "Come on, you slow-pokes. We haven't got all night."

Following their guide, before long the boys came out of the woods into the clearing around the deserted cabin where old settlers once had lived. The dog had stopped in the clearing and was pawing at some fallen logs half hidden in a tangle of brush.

"I shore don't see nobody around here," said Tommy, after a good look around. "You s'pose that dang dog has brung us all this way jest to help him git a skunk outen a holler log? Iffen he has, I'm li'ble to take a rock an beat his brains out."

Bouncer whined through his nose, still pawing at the logs.

"Well, hit won't hurt to take a look, now that we're here," said Abe. Cautiously—having skunks in mind—he approached the spot. "Looka here. This is where they had their well."

"Dogged iffen you hain't right."

Obviously at some time in the past the well curb had crumbled away, and someone had thoughtfully laid a couple of logs over the hole. Then the logs had rotted. One of them now was no more than a jagged stub.

"You reckon Windy could of fell in here?" Tommy wondered. "Say he set down to rest on this log that's busted, an hit give way under him. Here, help me move this stuff. I'm gonna look."

It was hard to see down the hole, especially in the failing light. A glimmer told the boys that the well still had water in it.

"I kin make out somethin white stickin up outen the water," Abe said in a hushed voice. "A face, like. You reckon that's him?"

"God Almighty, hit's him all right! Windy! Hey, Windy!"

The hollow sound of Tommy's voice died out in the well. There was no sound in answer, and no movement down there. "Must be he's dead," Tommy breathed.

The boys looked at each other, large-eyed. For a moment they were paralyzed. Each in his private thoughts wished mightily that he were somewhere else.

"Well, we got to find out," Tommy said at last. "Now,

how in hell air we a-gonna git down there withouten no rope?"

"Maybe we could use saplins—make a ladder, kind of," Abe suggested.

It took some time to cut a couple of saplings and trim the branches with only pocketknives for tools, but somehow they managed.

"I'll go," Tommy volunteered. "You air too heavy, Abe; these here poles air kinda spindlin. You hold 'em steady at the top."

Fortunately the well was not deep; with their butt ends braced against the side of the well closest to Windy's inert body, the saplings just about reached to the top. Abe lay on his belly on the ground so he could reach in and brace them, and Tommy gingerly began his climb down into the darkness.

To Abe it seemed an age before Tommy's voice floated up, saying, "I'm all right, Abe. They ain't much water here." There was a sound of splashing, and then Tommy said, "He don't move a-tall. How in hell am I gonna git him up?"

"Kin you git him over yore shoulder?"

"Well, I kin try," the hollow voice answered from the well. It was followed by more splashing sounds and then a series of grunts.

Abe felt the saplings jerking in his hands as Tommy struggled upward with his burden. The slender poles were buckling under all that weight. Abe was glad now of his unusual strength, for the saplings were creaking ominously when, just in time, he let go of them and grabbed hold of Tommy and Windy by their clothes. For a long minute he could do nothing but just hang on. Then Tommy managed to get an arm over the lip of the well and brace himself with his feet. Carefully Abe took Windy and dragged him to safety, and then gave Tommy a hand.

"I think he's still livin'," Tommy said as soon as he had wind enough to speak.

"Yep, he's breathin. But from the looks of him, he'll shore be dead soon iffen we don't git him home. He's kinda half in this world an half in the next."

The boys could hardly hear each other for Bouncer's happy barking. The dog was doing a sort of dance around Windy, stopping every now and then to lick his master's face. The boys had hopes that the licking and all that racket would rouse Windy, but they were disappointed; Windy lay as still as a corpse.

"Reckon we could drag him on poles, like a deer?" Tommy wondered.

"Naw, he'd git hurt thataway. We'll hafta carry him."

They pulled him to a sitting position and got his arms around their shoulders, but his arms were lifeless, and his head bobbed on a limber neck.

"Old Windy hain't no help a-tall," said Abe. "He's limp as a sack of meal."

"An a damn sight heavier," Tommy added ruefully.

Locking arms under Windy's thighs, they staggered to their feet and started on their way, walking crabwise. It was a slow and awkward way of traveling.

"Hit's a good thing we got no fences to climb," said Tommy. "Gittin him over the logs an bresh'll be bad enough. I hate to think about hit."

"We better git to the lane, even iffen hit is the long way," Abe decided. "Hit'll shore be dark afore we git there."

The way back seemed a thousand miles long; at least a dozen times the boys were sure they'd never make it. But somehow they did. Bouncer, trotting in the lead, kept looking back to make sure that his friend Windy was coming along. Before the little group had got within hailing distance of the Smith cabin, Bouncer broke out again in joyous bark-

ing, to announce their coming, and before long Lulie came running with a blazing pine knot to light the way. Her brother Coon and Windy's pa were close behind, and they carried Windy the rest of the way.

"That dog has sense," Tommy said with a sigh. "I'm so tarred I could lay down right here in the road."

It was heart-warming to see how glad Lulie and Windy's folks were to get him back. "God has answered our prayers," Hattie Smith cried. "He's alive, praise be!"

Nobody took time now to thank Tommy and Abe, but they didn't expect that yet; the thing to do now was to try to bring Windy around. In the house, when Windy had been laid on the bed, the boys told briefly about finding him in the well.

Old Josh Hart had come over to sit with the Smiths in their trouble, and as soon as he heard the story, he took his pint of red-eye from his pocket. "What that boy needs is a little whisky. Hattie, git some water warm to make him a toddy."

Windy's aunt, Clara Hudspeth, also had come. Nothing but tragedy would have got her in the same room with Old Josh, for Mrs. Hudspeth was strong for temperance. "Don't let 'em do it, Hattie," she protested, her beady little eyes bright with anger. "Iffen hit was my boy, I'd never let them sinners pour that poison rotgut down his throat. God will shorely punish 'em."

Old Josh snorted like a bull, and Windy's pa, without saying a word, took the bottle and dripped a little of the raw liquor between Windy's lips. Mrs. Hudspeth clamped her arms tight across her bosom and plumped herself down on a stool with a resolute air, as if she expected God's lightning to strike the cabin any minute.

"Hattie, help me git these clo'es offen him an git him kivvered," Si said. "He's wet as a drownded rat."

Lulie came to the bedside with a cup. "I het some milk," she said.

Now at last Windy opened his eyes. After a moment of bewilderment he accepted a sip of the milk, which was well spiked with whisky. Then he lifted his head and drained the cup.

"You got some more?" His voice was a faint croak.

Little by little, as Windy gathered strength, his story came out. Just as Tommy and Abe had figured, he had sat down on the rotten log and fallen in the well. That had been a bad moment, but worse moments had followed, when he had discovered that the moss-grown walls of the well were too smooth and slippery for him to climb out. Still, his fingers had bled before he had stopped trying. Then he had started calling for help, even though he had known no one could hear him. He didn't remember much about the time after his voice had given out.

"Son, you got any bones broke?" Si inquired anxiously.

Windy made feeble testing movements of his arms and legs. "No, I don't think so. I'm jest wore out an hongry."

Mrs. Hudspeth got up and busied herself at the hearth. "I'll make him some mush. Mush an milk air good for anybody."

Hattie Smith and Lulie were kneeling by the bedside, holding Windy's hands and sobbing. "Oh, Windy, honey, please forgive me," Lulie begged.

"What on earth for?"

"For what I was a-goin to say to you. For what I was thinkin Sunday an all day Monday, when all the time you was down there in the water." She sobbed some more, then wiped her eyes and nose on her skirt and said, "Honey, now I know how much I love you. We'll go to Booneville or Rockport an git married the very first day you air able."

When he heard that, Windy lifted his head and grinned

from ear to ear. "Lulie, you know that's what I been a-waitin to hear. By thunder, iffen hit took me a-fallin in a well to make you say hit, well then, hit was worth hit. I got no complaints."

Still grinning, he let his head fall back, and was sound asleep before it hit the pillow. His ma and Lulie stayed on their knees, still clinging to his hands. And at this point Abe and Tommy, with Old Josh stepping in their tracks, quietly tiptoed out of the cabin and went on home.

ABE WAS IN BROWN'S STORE

one day when Mrs. Ingram came in. She greeted him warmly, in a way that reminded him of Polly's ma, and Abe thought, "Seems like the mothers like me, but the daughters don't. I jest don't set very well with the gals."

He noticed that Betty's ma bought unusually large quantities of food. After she had gone, he remarked to Mrs. Brown, "Looks like the Ingrams air havin a logrollin or a barn-raisin or somethin."

Martha Brown looked wise. "Yes, they'll be big doins over there tomorrer. You shore you hain't heard?"

"No'm, hain't heard a thing."

"Well, Betty Ingram an Willis Youngblood air a-gittin married tomorrer. They been keepin kinda quiet about hit—didn't tell nobody till today. I think Willis had the notion that iffen word got around, somebody might try to raise some kinda fuss. Reckon you know who I mean, Abe."

"Yessum."

"That Willis's a terrible jealous feller. I've heard him say he'd whop the daylights outen any other feller that so much

as looked at Betty." Mrs. Brown put her hand to her mouth, as if she'd suddenly remembered something. "Land's sake, Abe, don't tell nobody I told you about the weddin."

Abe said nothing, and so promised nothing. Forgetting about work for the rest of that day, he hurried home. Sarah had become a close friend of Betty's and would know all about this.

Sarah confirmed the news, and said, "I was gonna ast you to ride me over there in the mornin, Abe. I'm s'posed to help with the bakin an all. Willis an Betty's pa air a-ridin to Booneville in the mornin to git the license. The preacher'll be there at five in the evenin, an then they'll be the weddin supper, after."

"Shore I'll ride you over, Sarah."

Abe knew that he'd have to ride over now to the Garrisons' and tell Tommy, for Abe felt that Tommy had a right to know. If Tommy didn't hear about the wedding until afterward—until it was mentioned, say, in the saloon—he'd certainly feel that he'd been made a fool of.

Tommy was in the yard, chopping wood, when Abe rode up.

"I come to bring you some bad news," said Abe. "I was half a mind not to, cause I'm afeard you'll never forgive me for bein the one that told you. You got to promise me not to fly up in the air, 'cause this here is somethin that's yore own dang fault."

"What on earth you got on yore mind?" Tommy asked. "Come on, spit hit out and git hit over with."

"Betty's gittin married to Willis tomorrer."

Tommy swung his ax one more time, making it bite deep into the log. "Like hell she is!"

"Hit's a fack." Abe told everything he'd heard, and added, "I was afeard that while you was foolin yore time away, somebody else'd git the real gal."

"I been a fool," Tommy admitted. "But Willis can't have Betty. I'll git her iffen I hafta wade through blood."

"Hit's too late, Tommy; things has went too far."

"Not quite. Look, Abe. Betty told me onst that she loved me. I say, iffen hit was true then, hit's still true; she still loves me. Why you s'pose Willis's skeered of me findin out about the weddin? Why, 'cause he knows I'll come between him an her. By God, that's jest what I aim to do."

Abe was amazed. "How you figger to do hit?"

"Well, I kin show you better'n I kin tell you."

Abe looked hurt, thinking that Tommy wasn't willing to confide in him, and so Tommy told him. "While Willis's off a-gittin the license, I'm a-goin over there an ast Betty to ride to Rockport with me." He grinned and punched Abe lightly on the shoulder. "She's a-gittin married tomorrer, all right. But I betcha not to Willis Youngblood."

Abe whistled. "You got the nerve to do a trick like that?"

Tommy's face showed that he had. "You wanta help me, Abe?" He explained what help he wanted.

"Shore, I'll do that."

Next morning, as soon as he had dropped Sarah in the Ingrams' dooryard, Abe hurried to the crossroads and took up his post on the porch of Brown's store. Before long, Tommy rode up and waved. He was all dressed up in his Sunday best, and looked and acted jaunty, just as if he hadn't spent a sleepless night tossing and worrying. When Abe shook his head, signaling, "No, not yet," Tommy tied his horse and quickly disappeared into the saloon.

He'd had a couple of quick drinks to reinforce his nerve when Abe came and beckoned him outside.

"Willis an Old Man Ingram jest rode through town."

"That's fine. Hit'll take 'em most of the day to git to Booneville an back. I'd be beholden to you, though, Abe, iffen you'd watch out a while longer; jest in case they forget

somethin an turn back. You could ride ahead an warn me iffen you see 'em comin."

"Glad to."

Before Tommy went to his horse, he bought some candy in the store. "Betty's brother Sammy is good friends with me," he explained. "I allus useta bring him somethin. This here might come in handy."

Abe shook Tommy's hand and wished him luck.

Until he was out of sight of the crossroads, Tommy rode slowly, so as not to attract attention, but as soon as he dared he whipped his horse to a gallop. When he was near the Ingram place he slowed down again, approaching it cautiously by a roundabout way that kept the barn between him and the house. Once in the barn lot he reined in, listening intently.

The sounds from the house suggested that every woman in the county was here, helping to prepare the wedding supper. Rich smells of pies and cakes and roasting chickens came on the breeze. "Dogged iffen I don't aim to git in on all that good eatin," Tommy thought, and grinned.

Dismounting, he waited patiently until he heard Sammy come out into the yard. Then Tommy whistled softly. When Sammy came around the corner of the barn to see who was whistling, Tommy had a warning finger to his lips and was holding out a piece of candy in the other hand.

"Do me a favor, Sammy?"

"Shore, Tommy. You got some more candy?"

"All my pockets full. Now, here's how you git it. You git Betty out here without lettin on to nobody that I'm here—not even her. Kin you do that?"

"Reckon so."

"Air you man enough to keep a secret, Sammy? Kin I trust you?"

Sammy couldn't talk now because his mouth was too

full, but he bobbed his head vigorously, then ran off toward the house.

In the bedroom—the Ingram’s house was a substantial one of two rooms and a dogtrot—Betty was trying on her wedding dress. Sarah Lincoln had just pulled out the last of the basting threads.

“How does hit fit, Sarah?”

“Hit’s beautiful, Betty. You look jest like a doll.”

Betty shook her brown curls. “Afore the preacher comes, I’m a-goin to pin my hair up on the top of my head.”

“That’ll look real elegant.”

Sammy’s impish face appeared in the doorway. “Howdy, Bet,” he said in a teasing tone.

“Sammy, I’ve told you a hunnerd times my name’s Betty, not Bet.”

“That’s right, Bet. Bet, Bet, she’ll git there yet,” he sang.

“You young scamp, I’m a-gonna box yore ears for that!”

“You gotta ketch me first.”

Betty chased him out into the yard, then hesitated for fear she’d get her dress dirty before the wedding. To make sure that she followed him, Sammy danced before her, just out of reach, and called, “Pore old Bet. Couldn’t ketch me in a hunnerd years!”

That did the trick; Betty lifted her full skirt in her hands and took out after him. Following him around the corner of the barn, she suddenly found herself in Tommy’s arms.

“Don’t be mad at him, Betty. He done hit for me.”

“Tommy! What on earth air you a-doin here?”

“I had to see you.” Tommy gave Sammy a handful of candy and told him, “You go somewheres else now. They’s more candy for you later iffen you don’t say nothin to nobody.”

Betty tried to get loose from Tommy’s arms, but he wouldn’t let her go.

"I guess you didn't know," she said. "Tommy, I—I'm gittin married today. To Willis."

"I heard. Honey, why'd you tell that numbskull you'd marry him?"

Betty didn't answer.

"Honey, I know I done wrong to go with Martha. You air the one I love. You know that, don't you? You know I love you more than anything in this world." He kissed her hard. "Remember all the plans we once made?"

"I remember ever'thing."

"You still love me jest a little bit, don't you?"

In answer she dropped her head so that her face was hidden against his chest.

"Will you go for a little ride with me?"

Betty plainly wanted to, but was afraid. "Ma would be mighty mad."

"She'll git over hit. You know, this'll be the last ride you'll ever take while yore name's Betty Ingram. Come on, git up on the water trough so's you kin jump on behind."

With Betty behind him, Tommy turned his horse along the same roundabout way by which he'd come, so that no one would see them. But once they were on the main road, he turned southeastward, kicking the horse into a trot.

"Betty, you know where we air a-goin?"

"Where, Tommy?"

"To Rockport, to git married. You an me. When we come back, you'll be Mrs. Tom Garrison." He held his breath, waiting to hear what she'd say to that.

"Lawsy me, an me with my hair not even combed," she said. "I was aimin to put hit up."

When they came in sight of the river, just outside of Rockport, Tommy slowed down at Betty's request and she fixed her hair as best she could with her fingers. "Lucky thing I got my weddin dress on, but I must look a sight."

Tommy burst out laughing from sheer happiness. "Honey, you look beautiful. You shore suit me jest like this, an that's what matters."

An hour later, when they had been married by a justice of the peace, Betty put her arms around Tommy's neck and said, "Now I'm the happiest girl in the world." She shivered. "That was a narrow escape. Iffen I'd married Willis, I know my life would of been miserable."

"Iffen you'd married Willis, I believe I'd of killed him."

On the way back they rode through Loafer Station, where Abe was still hanging around in front of the store.

"Abe, meet my wife," said Tommy.

"Howdy, Miz Garrison," Abe said, grinning as cheerfully as he could manage.

"Has Willis an Betty's pa rode through town yet?" Tommy asked.

"Nope, not yet."

At this reminder of Willis, Betty turned pale and her arms tightened around Tommy's ribs. "Darlin, I couldn't stand to lose you now. S'posin Willis has a gun handy when he finds out . . ."

"Don't you worry, honey," Tommy said confidently, and Abe tried to reassure her, saying, "I got a idee Willis'll be meek as a lamb."

The newlyweds urged Abe to come along with them for the wedding supper, but he put them off, saying he'd be along later. It wasn't easy to help another fellow, even your best friend, to win the girl you loved; now that he'd done his part, Abe felt like being alone.

A frown of worry pulled his eyebrows together as he watched them ride off. Certainly Willis would be within his rights to beat the tar out of Tommy if he could. Abe didn't think Willis could.

"But a thing like this could cause a killin'," Abe thought.

The thought flashed through his mind that if Willis and Tommy killed each other, the field would be clear for Abe Lincoln. He remembered the glimpse of heaven he had had in a few brief hours with Betty. Then immediately he grew hot with shame.

Now he became aware of a fellow-feeling for Willis. When Willis and Old Man Ingram rode past, Abe decided to wait about an hour before he followed them. He would have to go to the Ingram place eventually, of course, in order to take Sarah home, but he didn't want to be one of those who would be standing around staring when Willis found out what had happened.

At the Ingram place Betty left Tommy outside and ran into the house.

"Well, young lady," her ma said, "will you please tell me where you been?"

"I went for a ride with Tommy Garrison, Ma."

"My land! That was a purty thing to do. I'll hafta give that young man a piece of my mind. I jest hope Willis don't find out." She would have said more on the subject if there had been time. "You better hurry an git yourself fixed up, an then come finish settin the table. We needed yore help here today. Thank goodness Sarah was here; she done all yore share of the work."

"I'll dance at yore weddin for that, Sarah," Betty said. The girls exchanged knowing smiles, for that morning Sarah had confided her decision to marry Aaron Grigsby within a few weeks.

In the bedroom Betty gave Sarah the news, but warned her, "For heaven's sake, don't let on yet to Ma. Tommy an me decided to wait till ever-body's here an tell 'em all at onst."

Outside, Tommy was telling Sammy, "Here's some real good candy, all the way from Rockport."

Now the wedding guests were arriving, and Tommy followed a group into the house. Most of them seemed surprised to see him, and Mrs. Ingram gave him a dirty look which said plainly that he had no business there. Tommy patted the marriage certificate in his pocket and stared right back at her.

Soon the preacher arrived, and then came Betty's pa and Willis.

"Sammy, here's some candy from Booneville," said Willis.

Sammy now had his mouth and both hands full. "I like weddins," he said. "I hope Sally grows up quick an gits married."

Beaming with happiness, Willis reached out to take Betty in his arms, and Tommy's muscles tensed; he wasn't going to have any fellow slobbering over his wife. Betty pulled away from Willis.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Oh well, I reckon you air jest nervous. You'll feel differ'nt later on. Looka here." Willis took the license from his pocket and unfolded it. "This here's what I been a-waitin for so long."

Betty glanced at the paper and looked away quickly; she didn't like the sight of it. Willis displayed it proudly to everyone in the room.

Now the preacher had his book open, ready for the ceremony. Willis took Betty by the hand and drew her forward to stand beside him. The preacher cleared his throat.

It was at this point that Tommy stepped forward and in a loud voice said, "Well, folks, this has went far enough."

The guests began to buzz. "That feller went with her first," one woman said to another. "Him an her started out when they was both knee-high to a toad. Maybe seein her a-gittin married to another feller is more'n he kin stand."

"Maybe he's lost his mind."

Mrs. Ingram was thinking something like that. "Sammy, run out to the shed," she whispered, "an bring back the

strongest piece of rope you kin find. Hit might be needed. Hurry, now."

"Now see here," Willis began, turning red, but Betty's pa said, "Never mind. We better jest take him out."

"Hold on," said Tommy. "When I git through, you'uns kin have yore say. But they's one thing shore: Nobody's a-gittin married here, 'cause hit's too late. Me an Betty was married today over to Rockport."

"God help us through another day," cried Mrs. Ingram, raising the corner of her apron to her eyes. "I never thought I'd raise a gal to do a thing like that."

"Well, Ma," said Mr. Ingram, "iffen what he says is true, they's nothin we kin do."

Tommy passed around the marriage certificate to prove that it was true, all right. And now Betty ran into his arms. Willis turned from red to white and looked as if he were about to faint. Someone pushed a chair under him and he sat muttering to himself.

The preacher tried to comfort Willis. "Son, iffen she loves this other feller, you kin be thankful she didn't marry you. God watches over us all."

Since there was no ceremony for him to perform, the preacher was about to leave, but Mrs. Ingram asked him to sit down for supper. "Willis, we hope you'll stay an eat too," she urged.

Soon all the guests, including Abe, who had just arrived, were seated around the table. Sometime during the course of the meal Willis got up and slipped out without saying a word; as soon as he had gone the look of strain disappeared from the circle of faces and the supper became a real celebration. Tommy's face was shining with pride. All evening he sat with his arm around Betty, and everyone could see that they were having a hard time keeping their hands off each other.

"Hit shore pays to have good friends," Tommy told the

company. "Twarn't for Abe here, I'd of lost the girl I love."

Abe managed somehow to smile and crack jokes. Betty and her ma kept piling food on his plate, and would have had their feelings hurt if he hadn't eaten it; he had to choke it down. It did no good to protest that, big as he was, there was some limit to how much he could hold. Abe was mightily relieved when at last Sarah signaled him that it was time to go.

Tommy pumped Abe's hand, telling him good-night. "Yep, you been a real friend, Abe. I won't never forget you for this, iffen I live to a hunnerd years."

*A*BE WAS MIGHTY LOW IN spirits these days. He no longer hugged his pillow at night, pretending it was Betty, but he still ached with love whenever he thought of her, and he couldn't keep from thinking of her once in a while.

His pa worried about Abe's despondency. "The boy takes things hard," Tom said to Sally. "Hit looks like some gal has sacked him."

"Well, I shore hope God will make hit up to him someday."

When Abe drifted into the saloon one day, Old Josh remarked, "By God, I never seen sech a long face on a young feller. Now, Abe, today was what you was a-lookin forwards to all day yestiddy—hain't that right? But now you got hit, you don't like hit. Hit beats all."

Charley Harper was down in the mouth too that day. "This has been a bad year for me. My mortgage comes due this fall, an what with the drouth an the dang bugs, I'm like to lose my mind. What's more, I still hain't got even with

John Gore. That hoss he traded me hain't worth the fi'th teat on a cow."

"Where's Tommy Garrison?" someone asked Abe.

"Hain't seen him in a couple weeks, come to think of hit," someone else remarked.

"Don't you remember?" said Jim Ashly. "Tommy jest got married. Hain't nobody seen him for a spell."

"Iffen I had me a purty young gal like Tommy does, I'd be a-stayin close to home myself," said Old Josh.

The fellows all laughed an made the usual jokes about newlyweds.

"I hear Tommy and Betty was married by a justice of the peace," said Coon Hesson.

"That's right," Abe told him.

Coon shook his head sadly. "'Tain't a good sign. I was married by a justice of the peace, an by jacks, I hain't had no peace since then, nor no justice, neither."

"Tommy was shore lucky to git the gal," said Baldy Bill.

"I'd say the gal was lucky too," said Jim. "Look how close she come to marryin the wrong feller. Puts me in mind of old Hiram Collins."

"How's that?" somebody asked.

"Well," said Jim, as he wiped the bar, "old Hiram an his wife, they had a big passel of childern an gran-childern, an then after they'd been married forty year, she up an died. The Rever'nd Spradlin preached at the buryin, an afterwards he tried to cheer old Hiram up a little. 'Brother Collins,' says the Rever'nd, 'I know hit's a sore trial for a man to lose a good wife after forty year.'

"'I dunno,' says old Hiram, an spit. 'She was a good wife to me, all right. But you know, I never liked her.'"

"Speak of the devil, an his imps will appear," said Old Josh, as Tommy walked in the door.

Tommy got plenty of back-slapping and congratulations,

as well as a lot of good-humored teasing. Jim set up a round of drinks in his honor.

"By the way," Baldy Bill asked Tommy and Abe, "did you'uns ever git that heifer you had a-comin for findin Windy Smith?"

"By God, we never," said Tommy.

"Bet Si Smith's a-hopin the both of you will clean forget about hit. Si's a real skinflint. He's the kind that allus sings loudest in church when he's jest cheated somebody in a trade."

"Jest like Bill Brown," said Old Josh. "You kin allus tell when Bill's about to foreclose a mortgage, from the way he leads in prayer."

"Well, Abe," said Tommy, "what say we ride over to Si's place today an drive our calf away?"

"Might be too late," said Baldy Bill. "Si's got his boy back now. S'posin he don't wanta give you'uns the heifer?"

"He better not try nothin like that," said Tommy. "Si Smith don't know hit yet, but I got the Garrison temper, jist like my old gran'pappy. An I hain't askeered of nobody, no more'n he was. Why, my gran'pappy would fight a buck-saw. Ever'body says he was the one who run the Injuns outen Ohio. They say them Injuns taken to the hills an hollers when they seen him a-comin; they clumb trees an hid in caves, an finely they up an left, jest to git away from that man. That's how Si's a-gonna feel about me iffen he don't keep his promise."

"Well, I know yore pa," said Baldy Bill. "Reckon hit don't pay to fool with a Garrison."

"Besides," Old Josh put in, "Tommy'll have Abe with him when he goes there." But then Old Josh shook his head dubiously. "I dunno. I've seen killins over less'n a heifer."

"They won't be no killin this time," Abe assured him. "But we'll git the calf."

Later the boys felt foolish. On the way to the Smith place they were all keyed up for trouble, but when they got there, they found that nothing was too good for them. Windy's ma made a big fuss over the young fellows who had saved her son's life, and Windy pumped their hands and thanked them many times.

Windy went over every minute of his experience in the well. "After I give up tryin to climb out, I felt plumb weak. I hadda set up to keep my head outen the water, but ever now an then I'd kinda slide down sideways an go under. Then the cold water would bring me to. I figgered I was a goner for shore."

With Windy and his ma repeating over and over that nothing would ever repay the boys, Windy's pa would have had a hard time getting out of paying the promised reward. For all Abe and Tommy knew, he had never even thought of hedging on his promise. And so, soon they were riding away with the heifer on a lead rope.

"Now we got her, what'll we do with her?" Tommy wondered. "She belongs to the both of us, but lessen we butcher her, they hain't no way to divide her in two."

"You keep my half," said Abe.

"Naw, that wouldn't be right."

"Shore hit would. Hit was yore idee to look for Windy, an you went down the well after him."

"Twarn't for you, him an me would still be in there."

"Shucks. Anyways, I got a calf already. Now you'll have one, too. Bein a married man, you need hit to git started."

Tommy still demurred, but Abe said, "I got no use for a calf no more, 'cause I don't aim to settle down on a farm."

"You mean you aim to leave these parts?"

"Yep. I jest made up my mind. I'm a-goin over to Rockport, maybe git a job on a flatboat goin down the river."

"What made you decide to do that?"

"They's nothin for me around here—only hard work an no pay in hit. I feel like I'm a-wastin my time." To himself Abe thought, "Here's where I lost Ma an Betty, the two people I loved best in the world. What's to hold me now?"

"Well, I'll shore be sorry to see you go."

"Afore I go, they's a little chore of buildin I'd like to do at home. Reckon you could come over tomorrer an give me a hand?"

"I'll be there in the mornin."

At home Abe found his pa by the hog pen.

"Pa, I wanta talk to you."

Tom Lincoln nodded. By unspoken agreement, he and his son took the path up the hill, walking in Indian file, with Tom in the lead. Neither said anything until they were seated on the log beside Nancy's grave.

Tom took the corncob from his mouth and studied the wisp of smoke which drifted from it toward the north. "Wind's from the south. Looks like we're due for more hot weather." He knocked the pipe out carefully and put it away, then bit off a chew of homespun. Not until this ritual was completed did he ask, "Well, son, what's on yore mind?"

Abe paused in the whittling he had begun. "Pa, I'm a-goin over to Rockport, git a job on the river."

Tom was saddened by this announcement, but not surprised. "I can't understand you, son. You got a good home here. Sometimes I think you wouldn't be contented no-where."

"Reckon I was cut out by the wrong pattern."

"Naw, you jest think that; you'll feel differ'nt someday. But you air old enough now to go out on yore own, iffen that's what you wanta do. I hain't a-sayin go or stay. I'm turnin you loose to do like you want; you air yore own man now."

Abe waited a minute, seemingly concentrating on his

whittling, and then said, "Reckon you'll think this is jest foolishment, Pa, but afore I go, I wanta build a shelter over the grave here. They's been times when I was kivered up warm in bed, listenin to the rain on the roof, an I couldn't sleep for thinkin of Ma layin out here on the hill in all kinds of weather."

"Abe, you know she's six feet under, down there. They can't no weather hurt her now."

"I know, but I can't help the way I feel. Anyways, the grave is mounded up real neat and pretty now. We don't want the rain an snow to wash hit down."

"That's right," Tom agreed. "But son, you've gotta look forwards, not backwards, like I told you. You still got yore mind too much on yore ma."

A little while later they broke the news to the rest of the family that Abe would be leaving for Rockport in a couple of days.

"It shore grieves me, Abe," Sally told him, "to hear you talk about goin off."

"Well, ma'am, I feel like I've lived out my time here. I wanta see some of God's great world."

"The boy's old enough for that," Tom told her. "I think hit'll do him good to git away for a while."

"Oh, you men! Jest like the birds, pushin the young'uns outen the nest to learn 'em to fly." She put the corner of her apron to her eyes. "Hit'll be mighty lonesome withouten Abe. First Elizabeth goin, an now Abe, an next Sarah. Afore we know hit, Thomas, Tilda, an Johnny'll be growed an gone, an then you an me'll be all alone here. I don't think I kin stand hit."

"Please, ma'am, don't take on," Abe begged. "I'll be a-comin back someday."

"Shore he will," said Tom. "He knows this here will allus be his home."

At supper Abe said, "Pa, I'm givin you back the calf, 'cause I won't need hit no more."

"Naw, I'll keep the calf for you, Abe. You'll need hit, all right, when you git married an settle down."

"Tain't likely I'll ever git married. Reckon I'll jest be a wanderer, like Jesus. You kin give the calf to Johnny iffen you want."

"Well, maybe. We'll see how well he does his work on the place."

Tilda and Johnny were all excited about Abe's coming adventure.

"But Abe," Tilda asked, "when you air a-workin on that boat, s'posin you was to fall off, right in the water?"

"Land's sake, don't think of sech things," Sally cried. "You know Abe can't swim."

"He can too!" Johnny burst out. "Him an me usta sneak off to the swimmin hole a plenty of times, an he taught me. Why, I bet Abe could swim across the Ohio River."

Tom just grunted and said, "Hit's been a good many years since you seen the Ohio, boy. Some places hit's more'n a mile wide."

"Well, Abe could swim hit," Johnny insisted loyally.

Next morning all the Lincolns were down in the mouth. "I was aimin to git a lotta work done today," Sally said, "but account of Abe, seems like I can't git my mind on nothin."

"Me too," said Sarah.

"Well, iffen we can't do nothin else, we might as well dip some candles."

Tommy arrived bright and early, and Abe got an ax and a saw and led him up the hill. Abe explained his plan for a shelter over Nancy's grave.

"On these hot summer days, she's got the oaks to shade her. But when hit comes rain an sleet and the blowin snow,

I can't bear to think of her in the cold ground, with nothin but the sky over her."

Tommy nodded to show that he understood, and they got to work cutting four posts and setting them up solidly at the corners of the grave. When the framework was done, they cut sapling poles for the roof and tied them on with strips of slippery-elm bark. "Pa says they's nothin stronger," Tommy said.

Late in the afternoon they rested awhile, sitting on the fallen log.

"This here's where I set when I come up here to talk to Ma," Abe said.

"You talk to her?" Tommy looked uneasy. "Onst I went to a knockin-spirit meetin. Old Miz Montgomery over at Ravin Tad, she talks to the spirits, an they knock on things in her house an move the table an the chairs around. The feller settin next to me at this meetin, he says, 'Soon as she gits in her trance, you'll see that table really start to walk.' But when they blowed the candle out, I got so skeered I jumped outen the winder an run all the way home."

Abe laughed. "Naw, I don't do nothin like that. When I come up here, I jest make out like Ma kin hear me. I kin talk to her, all right, but she can't talk to me."

That evening, after Tommy had gone home, Abe returned to the grave.

"Yep, I reckon that's the trouble, Ma: I kin talk to you, but you can't answer me. I hope you understand about me leavin. I jest got to git away for a while. I'll be back some-day, an then the first place I'll come will be right here. I'll ast Tommy to keep things nice here while I'm gone, an I know he'll do hit."

Tommy came back the next morning to help finish the job. When the roof was done, he and Abe criss-crossed poles at the sides of the shelter.

"Maybe Sarah'll plant some vines next year," said Abe. He was pleased with the results of his work, but still he thought, "I wished I could of made her something beautiful, like out of white marble."

That day Sally and Sarah provided an extra-special dinner, with wild-grape preserves and plenty of fried dried-apple pies. Tommy sighed with contentment as he rose from the bench.

"I'm so full I'm li'ble to bust—couldn't do no more work today iffen I had a mind to, an I hain't. Reckon we oughta mosey over to the crossroads, Abe, so's you kin say good-bye to all them loafers there."

"Reckon so."

The folks in the store were all mighty sorry to hear that Abe would be leaving in the morning. Old Man Brown shook his head disapprovingly. "Don't see no sense to hit. Where's a better place to settle down than Warrick or Spencer County, Indiana?"

"Abe's a smart feller," said Old Josh Hart. "He's got the right idee. Do yore travelin while you air young an single, else you'll maybe never git the chanst. Look at Tommy here; he got hisself married too young, an now, like as not, he'll never git to go nowheres."

"Well, I got what I want right here," Tommy answered.

Old Josh winked at him and spit in the general direction of the ash box.

"Great day, Uncle Josh!" Tommy exclaimed. "You spit right in the onion sets."

Old Josh looked around quickly to see if anyone else had noticed, and then took Abe by the arm. "Come on. We better git outa here."

In the saloon Tommy started everyone poking fun at the old fellow.

"Hit shore is a shame about Josh," said Moses Lemare.

"Time was when he was the champeen spitter of Warrick County. Why, he could drown a fly on the wall more'n twenty feet away."

"Well, I still kin," Old Josh bragged. "This today was jest a accident."

"My gran'pappy was the best spitter in the state of Ohio," Tommy said with a twinkle in his eye. "Uncle Josh here couldn't hold a candle to him. An I'm better'n he was."

That started Old Josh spluttering about whippersnappers and got the fellows laughing. The upshot of the discussion was that they all went outside and lined up for a spitting contest. Bill Shucks set a white pebble in the middle of the road for a target and drew a line in the dirt with a stick, then hunkered down and sighted along the line to make sure that nobody had his toes ahead of the mark.

After the first round most of the contestants dropped out. Charley Harper was laughing so hard that he couldn't purse his lips to spit at all, and Baldy Bill Jones got no farther than his own shirtfront. Only Abe and Tommy and Old Josh hit anywhere near the target, and after the second round they were the only contestants left.

"Best drink in the house free to the winner," Jim Ashly announced.

"That's talkin'," said Old Josh. "Now watch this."

"That was pretty close," said Charley Harper. "Looks like where our old goose jest left."

"I splashed the pebble, didn't I? Lessee these boys do better."

Tommy also splashed the pebble.

"Tommy's cheatin'," Baldy Bill complained. "You'uns seen him step one foot in front of the mark."

"Shore," said Tommy. "I got to do somethin to even things up. Abe's so tall, all he hasta do is lean over an he gains a good three foot."

Abe grinned—and spat squarely on the pebble.

"Meet Abe Lincoln, the new champeen," cried Jim, leading the way back into the saloon. "Now, Abe, I'm gonna set you up the biggest drink you ever saw."

"Put hit in two glasses," Abe told him. "Tommy'll hafta help me drink hit."

Tommy and Old Josh told the fellows then that Abe would be leaving in the morning. Everyone made a to-do over Abe, and several people wanted to buy him a farewell drink.

"I'm beholden to you'uns," said Abe, "but I reckon I don't want no more. I wouldn't want drinkin to git to be a habit with me, cause onst I seen a feller that had had too much. He was layin in a ditch like he was dead, an the flies had blowed him. I'd hate for that to happen to me."

When all the farewells had been said, he and Tommy left the saloon and stood for a few moments outside, looking the crossroads over.

"Loafer Station is shore a funny name for a town," said Abe. "Somebody must of had a grudge against the place, to name hit that."

"Reckon so," Tommy agreed. "You an me have had some mighty good times, here, though."

"Yep."

"I'll shore miss you, Abe."

"I'll miss you too, Tommy."

"Well, good luck."

"Good luck to you, an give my respects to Betty. Tell yore folks I'm sorry I didn't git over to see 'em 'fore I left. I meant to, but somehow I didn't git around to hit. You tell 'em, though, when I come back someday, first thing I'll do will be to go over an say howdy."

"I'll tell 'em. Well, keep yore powder dry."

The two friends shook hands and went their separate ways.

*T*OMMY AND BETTY WERE walking arm in arm in the woods behind their cabin one evening.

"I love to walk in the woods," said Tommy.

"Me too. But I love to be any place with you."

"You know, I reckon you an me air as happy as two people can be on this earth."

Betty squeezed his arm and smiled up at him. Then she said, "Smell the breeze. Squaw winter'll be here afore long."

"Yep. Here a whole year's gone by since we got married. Funny how time flies when you air happy."

"Iffen the baby's a boy, we'll name him Tommy."

"Don't you think they's enough Tommies in the world already?"

"No, I don't. Iffen hit's a boy, I wanta name him after the sweetest daddy in the world."

Tommy put an arm around his wife's shoulders and pulled her close. "Well, the sweetest ma in the world will be the boss."

They had come out of the woods now at the edge of the

pasture, and stood watching their little red calf nuzzling at its mother.

"Look at the little feller go," said Tommy. "Last year Nelly was hardly more'n a calf herself. She was jest a mite bigger'n that the day Abe Lincoln an me got her from Si Smith, on account of us finding Windy. You remember Abe, don't you, honey?"

"Shore I do."

"Now, there's a feller that's too good for his own good. Wonder how he's makin out on the river."

"I hope all right."

"You know, honey, Abe useta love you, maybe almost as much as I do."

"I know. I let him come over to the house onst. Not that I wanted to lead him on, but I felt so sorry for him, I jest couldn't say no. He was so sad, like. The way he took on about his ma dyin, folks at the Station was sayin he was losin his mind."

"Not Abe. He has more sense than all them loafers put together. I shore miss the old buzzard. Hope he comes back this way someday soon."

"Well, look who's here! Abe, hit shore is a pleasure to see yore homely face again." Old Josh Hart took hold of Abe's left arm and hung onto it, while all the others in the saloon gathered around to pump Abe's hand.

"Yep," said Baldy Bill, "reckon ever'body round here is mighty glad to see you back, Abe. You here to stay now?"

"Naw, I'll be goin down the river agin; I'm jest visitin. Here, lemme set on the bench. My folks been feedin me so good since I got home yestiddy that now I can't hardly stand up."

Old Josh sat down with him, still holding on. "Tell us where you been an all."

"I been all the way down the Mississippi to New Orleans, an I seen a plenty." Abe told about his trip on a flatboat. "One thing I seen in New Orleans I didn't like a-tall, an that's the slave market. I stood there an watched 'em buyin an sellin humans jest like they was animals. That ain't right."

A couple of the men argued with Abe about this, but he insisted, "You'uns can't tell me hit's part of God's plan for anybody to have power over other humans like that. Iffen you'd seen the things I seen, you'd say the same. No, all that will shorely hafta change someday."

The fellows gave Abe all the local news.

"They found a dead man over to Ravin Tad last week," said Frank Barnett. "Musta fell offen that high cliff, or been throwed off. Way they happened to find him, they was dozens of buzzards a-flyin over the place. Funny thing is, nobody knows who the bastard was."

"Did you know Betty Garrison was in the family way?" Bill Shucks asked.

"Nope, I hain't seen her an Tommy yet," said Abe. "I'm on my way now to visit Tommy's folks."

"Well, at least have a drink 'fore you go," said Jim.

Abe stood up to the bar, with Old Josh still hanging onto him like a leech. When the fellows had downed their drinks, Charley Harper, as always, sang out his rhyme about knocking down poor old granny.

"Abe," he said, "I been hearin for years about what a smart feller you air, but I bet you still don't know how to count in the Injun language. Tell you how hit goes: *teen tane, tether feather*—"

"Now, Charley," Moses Lemare cut in, "they's no law that says you got to finish that." And to the others, "I swear to God, this here idjit is the dangedest I ever seen—allus some kinda foolishment. Tomfoolery is all he ever thinks about."

"I dunno how we'd git along at the Station here withouten a little foolishment," said Jim. "'Twarn't for the tomfoolery, likely you'uns'd all git drunk an git to fightin."

Abe supported Jim and Charley on this. "I say, more foolishment an less fightin."

At last he was able to break away and ride over to the Garrison place, where he was greeted even more enthusiastically than in town. Melinda came out of the house, wiping her hands on her apron, and ran to shake Abe's hand even before he was off his horse. Eunie and Betsy followed her example.

"Go easy, ladies," Abe begged. "Them fellers at the Station purty near ruined me sayin howdy; but my arms air like to drop off." He rumbled Betsy's hair. "I see you hain't so shy no more." Now it was Lyddy who ran up to him in the yard and clung to his leg.

Isaac and the boys were quickly summoned from the woods, where they were clearing more land.

"Split my punkin iffen hit hain't our own Abe," Isaac called out.

For the rest of the afternoon Isaac and his boys sat around with Abe, talking about old times.

"I aim to ride over an see Tommy an Betty tomorrer," Abe said. "Wished Tommy was here right now."

Melinda had just announced that supper was ready, when Tommy rode into the yard. Abe noticed that the horse was lathered. Tommy greeted his friend with a shout and a hearty handshake, of course, but his grin was forced and his eyes were clouded with worry. He turned immediately to his ma.

"Ma, Betty's took down. Ma Ingram an old Miz Hesson air over there now, but I'd be thankful iffen you'd go too."

"Jest as soon's I kin throw a shawl over me, son."

"Pa, will you ride her over? I wanta go git Doc Kitchen."

"Go ahead."

Tommy left immediately, and Melinda got busy gathering up a few things.

"I don't mind sayin I'm worried about that child Betty. She's a little slip of a thing. I shore hope her baby hain't too big for her."

"Is they anything I kin do, Miz Garrison?" Abe asked.

"Iffen you'd come along, Abe, you'd come in mighty handy to chop wood an carry water. Bringin a child into the world takes a sight of hot water."

So it was that Abe happened to be in Tommy's dooryard when Tommy most needed the comforting presence of a friend. When enough wood and water had been gathered, the two young men paced together in the yard, and then, at Abe's suggestion, took a walk up the road to be out of ear-shot of the house.

"I can't understand how God kin let her suffer so much," Tommy kept saying.

The slow hours dragged away. Through the lighted windows Tommy and Abe could see the women running back and forth in the house. At last, when the night was fading, Tommy's ma stood in the doorway and beckoned.

"Betty's restin," she whispered when Tommy and Abe were just inside the door. "You kin talk to her when she wakes up, son. But looka here. Hit's a gal."

"Hain't she purty?" Tommy almost crowed. "Little Betty, by God! Look, Abe, don't she favor her ma?"

In Abe's opinion the tiny face was still so red that you couldn't tell what it was going to look like, but out loud, of course, he agreed.

Melinda sat the young men down in the lean-to kitchen and gave them something to eat. Before long Doc Kitchen joined them. He didn't have much to say, but he and Melinda exchanged mysterious glances.

It was Mrs. Hesson, the midwife, who let the cat out of the bag. "Doc, she's feverish. She don't look right a-tall."

"Well, we've done ever-thing we kin. Time will tell. She's in God's hands now."

Tommy turned white when the meaning of these words hit him. There was nothing he could do but sit with clenched hands until his ma-in-law summoned him into the other room.

"She wants you, Tommy."

Abe fetched more wood and water whenever he was asked, but for most of that day he sat by the hearth in the kitchen, whittling. He and Isaac Garrison tried to make talk, but they soon gave that up. Both of them—Abe especially—were sick with the same helplessness they knew Tommy must be feeling.

Sometime during the day Tommy came to the kitchen door and said, "Doc says she's goin to go. Abe, you was allus smart, an doctors don't know ever' thing. You come look at her, will you, an tell me what you think?"

The moment Abe saw Betty's white face and glittering eyes, he knew that Tommy was going to lose her. Betty knew that too. She didn't seem to see the others standing at the bedside, but slowly she turned her head toward Tommy and reached out for his hand.

"Tommy, honey, you'll love the baby an be good to her, won't you?"

Tommy dropped to his knees by her side, groaning. Abe laid a hand on Tommy's shoulder for a moment, and then, after a last look at the girl they both loved, left the room silently.

Tommy's ma sent Abe then to fetch the rest of the Ingram family. "Tell 'em to hurry."

Abe raised a cloud of dust as he galloped off on his errand. Before long he returned with Betty's pa and her

brothers and younger sister, but when they went inside, he waited out in the yard. By and by Tommy came out of the door alone, and Abe knew then that it was all over. Tommy stumbled to a log and sat down with his head in his hands, and Abe sat down beside him.

"Abe, this may seem strange to you and to ever'body," Tommy said brokenly, "but I don't ever want to lay eyes on that baby again. Hit's the cause of her death. Tell 'em to take hit away, outen my sight, outen my life. . . . Iffen I can't have Betty, I don't want anything."

Abe didn't say a thing, for there didn't seem to be much sense in talking. He just sat silently beside his friend for a long while, sharing his grief. As Tommy told his folks later, gradually he felt calmer and stronger because Abe Lincoln was there.

SEVERAL YEARS PASSED BEFORE Abe came home again to Indiana. During that time Matilda grew up and married Levi Hall, and Sarah, who had married Aaron Grigsby, sickened and died, and was buried in the Little Pigeon churchyard. Tom and Sally Lincoln had only Johnny left, until Abe came home. Abe gave up working on the river then and tried to settle down on the place, but he was restless.

Tommy was living now with the Ingrams; with the help of Betty's sister Sally, who loved the little girl as if she were her own, Mrs. Ingram was raising his motherless daughter. Tommy, too, felt restless sometimes, and once he and Abe talked about going off together to work on the Erie Canal. They never got around to it, though, for Tom Lincoln had other ideas. He had heard from John Hanks, a relative of Abe's mother, that there was rich farmland to be had in Illinois for ten dollars an acre, and Tom decided to move his family there. Folks in Warrick County tried to argue with him, but anytime Tom got his head set on something, there was no use in talking.

"I wanta git Abe away from here," he explained to Sally. "After all these years, you see how he still goes up the hill of an evenin an sets by his ma's grave, sometimes for two-three hours. They's times when he acks kinda strange. Best thing is to git him clean away, for good."

And so the Lincolns sold their land, most of their stock, and all of their tools and household stuff except what they could get into the wagon. When the wagon was packed they hitched up the oxen, took a last look around the place, and took the road westward. Dennis and Elizabeth went ahead in their own wagon, leading the little caravan.

At Loafer Station they stopped to say good-bye to friends and to buy some supplies for their journey. "Next town we git to will be Lick-Skillet," said Tom, "but we might as well do our buyin here at Brown's."

He and Dennis unyoked the oxen and turned them into the lot behind the blacksmith shop to graze, and then the menfolks went into the store.

"Me'n Elizabeth better use the time to pack things better in the wagons," said Sally. "I been hearin things a-rattlin, an we got a long ride ahead."

Tommy was in the store, and he and Abe talked while Dennis and Abe's pa made their purchases. Then the good-byes were said, and after about an hour Abe and Dennis went to get the oxen. But no oxen could be found.

Charley Harper rode by and asked, "Was them yore oxens I seen a-moseyin along the road about a half hour ago?"

Tom Lincoln was furious. "Them dang brutes must of headed right back home. Now we'll hafta go git 'em."

Sally and Elizabeth settled themselves under a tree in the Little Zion churchyard to wait.

"We might as well figger on campin here in town to-

night," said Tom, "'cause we can't start now till mornin'."

Tommy was standing by, and at this point put his oar in. "You know my pa wouldn't hear of that, Mr. Lincoln. When you'uns git yore oxens back, go on over an stay for the night at his place. I'll ride on now an tell Ma you'uns air a-comin'."

Melinda was pleased with the news. "I'll shore admire to have 'em. But all them people—Lord knows what to feed 'em for supper. Joe, you better drop whatever you been doin and go shoot some meat."

Johnny wanted to go along, but Joe said, "You make too dang much racket in the woods. I aim to git a turkey, an you know them birds—the least little noise, an off they go."

"I'll be quiet like a Injun, Joe, cross my heart. You let me go along, an iffen you shoot a turkey, I'll carry hit."

On those conditions, Johnny was allowed to go. He and Joe crept through the woods on tiptoe, and when they heard a gobble, they froze in their tracks, hardly breathing. Joe aimed carefully and shot. A crash sounded in the brush where the turkey fell, and when Joe and Johnny reached the spot, they found the biggest old gobbler they had ever seen. Joe stepped on its neck and yanked its head off, then backed off while the body flopped around on the ground.

"Jiminy!" said Johnny. "That feller's purty near as big as a b'ar."

"Yep. He'd feed us an the Lincolns an the Hankses an maybe a prayer meetin of people besides. Jest to be on the safe side, though, I'll see kin I git another, while you tote this feller home like you said you would."

Johnny was ashamed to back down, so he had Joe help him get the gobbler on his back. Johnny hadn't traveled far, though, when he began to stagger under the weight, and had to let the carcass slide to the ground. For a moment he was tempted to go off and leave it, but then he thought, "We

gotta have a real feast for the Lincolns." Sighing with weariness already, he grabbed the bird by its feet and dragged it.

Near the house Willy and Jack met him and dragged the turkey the rest of the way, each pulling on a wing.

"My land," cried Melinda, "did you ever see sech a bird? What in time kin we cook hit in?"

The only pot big enough was the black iron kettle used ordinarily for boiling clothes or making soap, out in the yard. Melinda and the girls gave it a good scouring with sand from the branch, to get all the soap taste out, then filled it up with water, while the boys piled up wood all around it to make a roaring fire.

"I might as well make up a mess of dumplins while I'm at hit," Melinda said. "An we oughta have apple pies on account of Abe."

By the time the Lincolns and the Hankses arrived, the smells of turkey and dumplings and pies hung in a fragrant cloud over the place.

"Dumplins," Tommy sighed. He was staying over, of course, in order to be with Abe. "Now, that there's a pot of eatin fit for a king. How long 'fore we kin git at hit, Ma?"

"Jest between you an me," his Pa said, "hit'll be a couple hours yet, anyways, afore you kin stick a fork in that turkey. That bird looked to be older'n Josh Hart."

Willy and the two Johnnies had been assigned to keep up the fire around the kettle, and so Abe and Tommy had time on their hands. They decided to take a walk, and automatically headed back toward the crossroads.

"Tommy, I wanta thank you for takin keer of Ma's grave all the time I was gone," Abe said. "I shore appreciate that."

"Don't mention hit," Tommy answered. "An don't worry that I won't allus keep hit nice."

"I shore hate to go off an leave Ma up there on the hill an Sarah in the churchyard," Abe said with a sigh, "but I

reckon Pa's right: The dead air through with trouble; a man's duty is to look out for the livin'."

At the crossroads, instead of heading for the saloon, this time Tommy turned toward the churchyard. "Sometimes I stop here jest to take a look at Betty's grave. You wanta come with me, Abe?"

This was a tactful gesture on Tommy's part; in effect, he was giving Abe permission to say good-bye to Betty. "I guess she kinda belonged to him, too," Tommy was thinking, "'cause he loved her."

They stood for a while beside the grave, each full of his own thoughts, and then, still without saying anything, headed back to the Garrison place.

"My little Betty's gittin purty as a picture," Tommy remarked proudly.

"She shore is," Abe agreed. "Spittin image of her ma."

Abe remembered what Tommy had once said in a moment of terrible grief, and he could understand what had happened since then: As the little tot had grown older and would hold out her hands to her pa and say, "Da-da," Tommy had begun to love her. Soon she had almost taken the place of her mother with him.

Through the gray of the gathering dusk a little screech owl swooped down and snatched up a field mouse.

"All this killin'," Abe said in a tone of disgust. "Then they's the sickness—my ma, an yore Betty. An poverty. Sometimes I think that's the worst evil in the world. Dogged iffen I kin see how the Lord kin take any pride in this kinda creation."

"I remember you got in some kinda ruckus onst, Abe, sayin you don't believe in Hell. Did you ever think, maybe this here world is the worst one the Lord has got? Maybe we air in Hell now, an jest don't know hit."

"I'll hafta think that over, but hit sounds like sense."

Tommy, though, thought now of his little Betty, and of the year he'd had with her ma. "No, I take that back. We got some heaven here, too—maybe about half an half."

"That there turkey shore smells like heaven now," said Abe.

The gobbler had turned out juicy and tender, and the dumplings and pies melted in your mouth. As many people as could squeezed onto the benches around the table, but Abe and Tommy had to squat on the floor with their plates, and the younger boys overflowed into the yard. Everybody ate to the bursting point.

"Betcha you won't git no turkey like this here in Illinois," Johnny Garrison said to Johnny Lincoln.

"Aw, I betcha we'll have bigger ones."

"Iffen they come bigger'n this one, they'll be oxens. I know, cause I hadda tote hit."

"While you'uns was gone," Isaac was telling Tommy and Abe, "Joe brung home another turkey. Lord knows what we'll do with hit."

"We'll jest cook hit for the Lincolns to take along to-morrer," said Melinda.

After supper everyone sat around feeling bloated as a toad, sometimes talking and sometimes singing, until Isaac said, "Tom here wants to git a early start to-morrer. Ma, all us men an boys kin try to squeeze into the loft, though I reckon some of us'll hafta let our feet hang outen the winder. But how'll you ladies an gals make out?"

"Oh, we'll git along. We kin make up pallets on the floor down here."

Melinda and Sally laughed together when, after the laughter of boys had died out overhead and the thuds of falling boots and shoes had ended, both Tom Lincoln and Isaac began a thunderous snoring. Everyone woke up late the next morning, and Isaac, as he came down the pegs,

remarked, "Look how light hit is outside. Seems like even the old rooster crowed late today."

"Well, I hain't surprised," Melinda told him. "What with the racket you men was a-makin, the pore bird prob'ly couldn't git no sleep last night."

After breakfast Melinda gave the guests two packages of victuals, one for each wagon, so that the travelers wouldn't have to stop along the way to eat. Then the oxen were yoked up and the good-byes began. Up to this time the visit with the Garrisons had been like a party, but when Tom and Sally got up on the wagon seat, Isaac looked mighty long in the face and Melinda put the corner of her apron to her eyes. When little Betty realized that Abe was going away, she began to wail.

Tommy and Abe shook hands. "Abe, I got a notion you'll amount to somethin someday, be a big man. Hit don't hardly seem right for you to do that in Illinois instead a Indiana."

Abe laughed. "Well, iffen I ever do amount to a hill of beans, I'll owe hit all to Indiana, 'cause here was where I growed up. Anyways, I won't never forgit you, Tommy. You been my best friend."

"I shore hate to see you go. I won't forgit you, neither."

Epilogue

WORD CAME TO THE GARRISONS that Abe Lincoln had taken up the law and had gone into politics. It was said that he was doing right well in Illinois. "Allus said he would," said Tom Garrison. When in the course of time Abe Lincoln became President of the United States, Tom Garrison, for one, was not a bit surprised. "Couldn't be nobody better for the job. I could of told you that thirty years ago."

When war came and President Lincoln called for men to defend the Union, Tom Garrison volunteered at once. Willy and Johnny Garrison followed his example immediately. Joe had to think it over for a few days, for Isaac was a very old man by then and he couldn't possibly be left with most of the work on the place. As things were, the Garrison womenfolk would have to help in the fields to keep things going.

Joe couldn't bear to stay home, though. "Iffen old Abe says he needs us, then we got to go." He and his son William both signed up.

Most of the other Garrisons thought that Jack, the youngest of the brothers, should stay at home and help his family, and so Jack stood at the roadside and watched while thirty-five men from around Loafer Station, with Tom Garrison at the head of the column, marched off to war. But it wasn't long before old Isaac decided that his youngest son might just as well die of a bullet as of a broken heart, and so Jack, too, went to war. And so did Tom Garrison's son John.

Tom's brother Johnny and Joe's boy William were killed in battle, fighting side by side, but the other Garrison men came back home eventually, all unhurt except for Willy. To his dying day people teased Willy about having been shot in the heel; they pretended to believe it couldn't have happened if he hadn't been running away. Willy would always flare up at that, for he had a quick temper. He married a woman with a worse one, and Tom used to say it was just as well that Willy and his woman never had any children, because when those two had their little spats, between them they'd break all the dishes in the house, and if they'd had any children, what would the poor young ones have had to eat from?

Tom lived to a ripe old age, and his mind was clear to the last, though in his later days he could remember things that had happened long ago better than he could things that had happened recently. A few years after Abe Lincoln had left Indiana, Tom had married Sally Ingram, and had fathered a large family. Often his surviving children, Betty, William, Nancy, and Dovie, and their children would get him to tell again about the battle of Chickamauga—how he and his brothers, the twins, had fired until their gun barrels blistered their hands; how he had lost his ramrod, and then had lain down on the battlefield so exhausted that he thought he would be just one more corpse, like the thousands he had seen that day; how he had ached with homesickness,

and for a while had doubted that what he had been fighting for was worthwhile.

"Iffen every Union soldier had of been as homesick as me that day," he'd say, "we'd never of won the war. I looked at them Tennessee mountains a-stickin up in the sky, an I wondered why anybody'd fight for sech a piece of country when iffen he had sense, he could live in Indiana. I remember how Captain Henry Mellin of Company G, First Indiana Cavalry, comes a-ridin up an says, 'Boys, they's been a hold-up. That Reb Colonel Mosby an his men piled ties on the track an shot up the train an got the payroll box, so you won't git yore money for a while.' I knowed yore ma would think I'd gambled away my pay. An I thunk how I'd seen the lake all red with blood—blood from men that had washed their wounds in the water, an from men that was dead.

"I was so tarred an homesick that day, I forgot what I was fightin about. A course I knowed how old Abe had said we couldn't live half slave an half free. I remembered how Abe'd allus been slow to talk, but how when he finely said somethin, he was mostly right. Jest for a while I forgot.

"But you can't lick the Indiana boys, by God. By an by I got up an found another ramrod an fit some more, an we won the war."

When people heard talk that old Tom Garrison had been a boyhood friend of Abe Lincoln's, they used to come in their buggies to ask old Tom to tell about it. He was always glad to oblige. He'd tell how at election time he'd ridden all over the county, getting folks to vote for Abe. "Not jest 'cause he was a friend of mine, but 'cause Abe Lincoln was the finest feller I ever knowed." Then he'd tell stories to show you the kind of fellow Abe had been in his young days.

One thing annoyed Tom Garrison more than he could stand. Every now and then somebody would imply that because the Lincolns had lived in a log cabin, they'd been

trash. Once somebody'd even said that he'd heard they'd slept on brush.

"Let me tell you," said old Tom, "the Lincoln family never 'slep' on bresh like animals. Why should they, when they had hay an straw from their own pasture, an cornshucks from their own field, and b'ar skins that Abe's pa had shot hisself? Why, the Lincolns was allus considered to be a cut above the ordinary around here. They wasn't too bad off, an Abe, when he was jest a young squirt, he could read an write an cipher better'n anybody else in the county. The Lincolns was a fine fam'ly, an him the finest. In all his life, he never slep' on no bresh bed."

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